

STAR  
WARSTM





# Rebel Force Omnibus

Alex Wheeler



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Rebel Force: Target  
Rebel Force: Hostage  
Rebel Force: Renegade  
Rebel Force: Firefight  
Rebel Force: Trapped  
Rebel Force: Uprising  
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This book is not to be sold or distributed!

Includes

Rebel Force:

Target

Hostage

Renegade

Firefight

Trapped

Uprising

## STAR WARS Timeline



### DAWN OF THE JEDI 25,793 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

25,793

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Dawn of the Jedi  
Dawn of the Jedi  
Volume One: Force Storm  
Volume Two: Prisoner of Bogan  
Volume Three: Force War



### THE OLD REPUBLIC 5,000-1,000 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

5,000

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Tales of the Jedi  
The Golden Age of the Sith  
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Crosscurrent

4,000

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Tales of the Jedi  
Knights of the Old Republic  
The Freedon Nadd Uprising  
Dark Lords of the Sith  
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Redemption

3,964

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

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Volume Three: Days of Fear, Nights of Anger  
Volume Four: Daze of Hate, Knights of Suffering  
Volume Five: Vector  
Volume Six: Vindication  
Volume Seven: Dueling Ambitions  
Volume Eight: Destroyer  
Volume Nine: Demon  
War

3,956

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

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REPUBLIC**

The Old Republic  
Revan

3,951

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

**KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REP-  
UBLIC II: THE SITH LORDS**

3,678

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Old Republic  
Volume Two: Blood of the Empire

3,653

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

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Deceived  
Volume One: The Threat of Peace

3,645

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

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The Old Republic  
Fatal Alliance  
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Annihilation

**THE OLD REPUBLIC**

3,638

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

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**THE OLD REPUBLIC: KNIGHTS  
OF THE FALLEN EMPIRE**

3,630

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

**THE OLD REPUBLIC: KNIGHTS  
OF THE ETERNAL THRONE**

2,974

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Lost Tribe of the Sith  
Spiral

1,032

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

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Volume One: Aflame  
Knight Errant  
Volume Two: Deluge  
Volume Three: Escape

1,000

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

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YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

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The Uncertain Path  
The Captive Temple  
The Day of Reckoning  
The Fight for Truth  
The Shattered Peace  
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YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

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YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

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Jedi Emergency  
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The Hunt for Anakin Skywalker  
Capture Arawynne  
Trouble on Tatooine  
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Festival of Warriors  
Pirates from Beyond the Sea  
The Bongo Rally  
Cloak of Deception  
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MENACE**

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### **Republic**

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Volume Three: Emissaries to Malastare  
Volume Four: Twilight  
Infinity's End

## **30 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope**

### **Republic**

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Volume Six: Darkness  
Volume Seven: The Stark Hyperspace War  
The Devaronian Version  
Volume Eight: Rite of Passage

## **29 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope**

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## **28 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope**

### **Jedi Quest**

Path to Truth  
Jedi Quest

## **27 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope**

### **Outbound Flight**

### **Jedi Quest**

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## **25 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope**

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## **24 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope**

### **Jedi Quest**

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### **Republic**

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## **23 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope**

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### **Star Wars Adventures**

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The Cavern of Screaming Skulls  
The Hostage Princess  
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The Shape-Shifter Strikes  
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### **Boba Fett**

Maze of Deception

### **Hunted**

### **Clone Wars**

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### **Jedi Trial**

### **Clone Wars**

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Duel at Shattered Rock  
Guardians of the Chiss Key

### **The Clone Wars**

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## **THE CLONE WARS: REPUBLIC HEROES**

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## **THE CLONE WARS: SEASON FOUR**

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## **THE CLONE WARS: SEASON FIVE**

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Volume Seven: When They Were Brothers

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*Coruscant Nights*

*Jedi Twilight*

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*Darth Vader & The Ninth Assassin*

*Last of the Jedi*

*The Desperate Mission*

*Dark Warning*

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*Death on Naboo*

*A Tangled Web*

*Return of the Dark Side*

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YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

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YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

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*Volume Two: Rebellion*

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*Jabba the Hutt*

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*The Dynasty Trap*

*Betrayal*

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*Lando Calrissian & the Mindharp of Sharu*

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YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

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*Lando Calrissian & the Flamewind of Oseon*

*Boba Fett*

*Enemy of the Empire*

*The Lando Calrissian Adventures*

*Lando Calrissian & the Starcave of Thonboka*

**THE FORCE UNLEASHED**

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*Agent of the Empire*

*Volume One: Iron Eclipse*

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YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

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*The Han Solo Adventures*

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*Han Solo's Revenge*

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*Adventures in Hyperspace*

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YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

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*Dark Forces*

*Soldier for the Empire*

*Empire*

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*Underworld - The Yavin Vassilika*

*Empire*

*Volume Two: Darklighter*

**EMPIRE AT WAR**

**X-WING**

*Blood Ties: Boba Fett is Dead*

**LETHAL ALLIANCE**

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**ROGUE LEADER**

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*Empire*

*Volume Three: The Imperial Perspective*

**ROGUE SQUADRON III:**

**REBEL STRIKE**

*Star Wars Missions*

*Assault on Yavin 4*

*Escape from Thyferra*

*Attack on Delrakkin*

*Destroy the Liquidator*

*Scoundrels*

*Pizzazz*

*The Keeper's World*

*The Kingdom of Ice*

*Star Wars Missions*

*Darth Vader's Return*

*Rogue Squadron to the Rescue*

*Bounty on Bonadan*

*Total Destruction*



*Rebel Force*  
Target  
Hostage  
Renegade  
Firefight  
Trapped

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Uprising

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Volume Two: Dark Encounters

*Science Adventures*  
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*Star Wars Missions*  
Revolt of the Battle Droids  
Showdown in Mos Eisley  
Bounty Hunters vs. Battle Droids  
The Vactooine Disaster

*Star Wars*  
Volume One: In the Shadow of Yavin  
Volume Two: From the Ruins of Alderaan  
Volume Three: Rebel Girl  
Volume Four: A Shattered Hope

#### ROGUE SQUADRON

*Galaxy of Fear*  
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City of the Dead  
Planet Plague

*Empire*  
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Volume Five: Allies and Adversaries  
River of Chaos

*Boba Fett*  
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*Empire*  
Volume Six: In the Shadows of their Fathers  
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*Galaxy of Fear*  
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The Swarm

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*Rebellion*  
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Volume Two: The Ahakista Gambit  
Volume Three: Small Victories  
Volume Four: Vector

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*Galaxy of Fear*  
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*Star Wars Adventures*  
Chewbacca & the Slavers of the Shadowlands

### 1 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

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#### THE STAR WARS HOLIDAY SPECIAL

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The Search for Grubba the Hutt  
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*Empire and Rebellion*  
Honor Among Thieves

Galaxies: The Ruins of Dantooine

*Star Wars Missions*  
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### 2 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

#### STAR WARS: GALAXIES

#### TIE FIGHTER

Splinter of the Mind's Eye

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Princess Leia and the Royal Ransom  
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*Epic Collection*  
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### 3 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

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Tales of the Bounty Hunters

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*Classic Star Wars*  
Volume Three: Resurrection of Evil  
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#### X-WING VS. TIE FIGHTER

#### EWOKS SEASON ONE

#### EWOKS SEASON TWO

#### EWOKS: CARAVAN OF COURAGE

#### EWOKS: BATTLE FOR ENDOR

*Classic Star Wars*  
Volume Five: A Fool's Bounty (#68-72)

#### SHADOWS OF THE EMPIRE

The Bounty Hunters: Scoundrel's Wages  
Battle of the Bounty Hunters

*Classic Star Wars*  
Volume Five: A Fool's Bounty (#73-81)

#### REBEL ASSAULT II: THE HIDDEN EMPIRE



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The Mandalorian Armor  
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*Classic Star Wars*  
Volume Six: Wookiee World  
Volume Seven: Far, Far Away

Shadows of the Empire: Evolution

X-Wing: Rogue Leader

*X-Wing: Rogue Squadron*  
Volume One: The Rebel Opposition  
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Volume Six: In the Empire's Service  
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**5** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope  
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Luke Skywalker & the Shadows of Mindor  
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**6** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope  
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**7** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope  
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Crimson Empire

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**18** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope  
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Jedi Bounty  
The Emperor's Plague  
Return to Ord Mantell  
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**NEW JEDI ORDER  
25-36 YEARS AFTER  
STAR WARS: A New Hope**

**25** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope  
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**29** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

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**35** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

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**36** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

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**40** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

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Volume Four: Alliance  
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Volume Six: Legacy  
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# ***TARGET***

BY ALEX WHEELER







## Chapter One

The Emperor closed his eyes and let the rage consume him.

An energy bolt of anger crackled across his body, turning his blood black with venom. A red mist clouded the darkness behind his lids. The fog of hate would have shrouded the vision of a lesser man. But when the Emperor opened his eyes, the blood-tinged world was sharper than ever.

Clarity. Understanding. *Power.*

*This* was what the rage could do for him. *This* was what pathetic Jedi had never understood, as they rejected their anger, letting cowardice block their path to the dark side. *This* was why they had been eliminated, and why the Emperor reigned supreme, his power unquestioned. His iron rule unassailable.

Until now.

*"My Lord, the Death Star has been...destroyed."*

The Emperor played with his memory of the moment, polishing it in his mind like a precious gem. Remembering: Darth Vader's voice as he delivered the news. Vader's anger, so forceful the Emperor could feel it from halfway across the galaxy. And with the anger, terror, for Vader knew how terribly he had disappointed his Master.

Vader knew it was not the first time.

## Alex Wheeler

The Emperor curled his fingers into a gnarled fist. The Death Star, his most powerful weapon, perhaps the greatest achievement of his reign, the key to destroying the tedious Rebel Alliance once and for all...*destroyed*. Even now, the detestable Rebels were no doubt celebrating their victory.

It was a meaningless victory, of course, and only a fool would think differently. But then, only a fool would join the ridiculous battle against the Empire.

Only a fool challenges the inevitable.

The Rebel Alliance was nothing but a nuisance, a millfly to be swatted away.

But even a meaningless victory was unacceptable. The Rebels would be punished. The Emperor smiled—the Rebels would be *crushed*. And soon. His impatience swelled. Fury boiled his blood at the thought of waiting any longer. The rage called for release, and the Emperor knew that with a thought he could destroy his opulent office. He could crack the building's foundation, rain rubble on the heads of those unlucky beings trapped within. He could, with the full power of his anger, unleash a fireball of death.

But he chose to wait. He chose control.

It was another thing the Jedi had never understood. A lesson that even Darth Vader, such a quick study in the school of darkness, had yet to learn. The rage was only a beginning.

*Control*, that was the key. Patience. The ability to channel the flood, bend it to your will. Anger was the fuel that powered the dark side of the Force. But success depended on *mastery* of the anger. Vader spent his anger without thought; the Emperor hoarded his, as a Hutt hoarded his treasure.

The destruction of the Death Star had been a setback, but every defeat masked an opportunity. And this was an opportunity the Emperor fully intended to seize.

In fact, he already had a plan.

## STAR WARS: Target

The Emperor activated his comm console, opening a line of communication to the lieutenant who sat quavering just outside the door, waiting on his command.

“Send them in.”

Ten of the most powerful men and women in the galaxy faced the Emperor, fear rolling off of them in waves. These were beings who could destroy ships—or cities—with a single word. Their hearts knew no mercy; their lives were founded on cruelties great and small; their names struck terror in their enemies. And yet they trembled before him, made small and weak by their own fear.

The most elite members of his Royal Guard flanked the group, their expressions hidden by their featureless scarlet masks. The Emperor had taken great pains to ensure that his throne room was an awesome and intimidating sight, from the towering walls to the gleaming dais. Behind his shadowed throne, a wall of permaplas windows looked into the heart of the Coruscant night. But his servants ignored the trappings of power. All attention was fixed on the Emperor.

“The Death Star has been destroyed,” he informed them, carefully noting their reactions.

Captain Thrawn betrayed no emotion. *Complete control*, the Emperor thought with approval. *This one will go far*. Crix Madine, leader of the elite Storm Commandos, frowned, conflicted emotions swirling deep beneath his surface. The fool thought he could hide his doubts from the Emperor. This foolishness would prove useful, thus the Emperor allowed it. For now.

Commander Grev T'Ran looked somber at the news. But before the expression dropped across his face, the Emperor had sensed something else. The beginnings of a smile. Such a small thing—a tensed muscle, a nearly imperceptible flinch—but it was enough. The Emperor had had his suspicions about T'Ran. Now they were confirmed.

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He raised a finger, catching the attention of the Royal Guard. Then nodded. T'Ran's face paled as one of the guards peeled away from the line. His crimson robes swept the floor as he padded silently toward the traitor. The other officers looked away, their faces grim.

"Nooooo!" T'Ran drew his blaster. "You can't—"

The guard's force pike jabbed into T'Ran's neck, silencing him forever. His body shuddered once, then dropped to the ground. The silent red figure waited on the Emperor's command, but the Emperor shook his head. They could take out the garbage later. For now, let the traitor stay where he was. It would serve as a helpful reminder.

"How did it happen, sir?" one of the officers asked. "The Death Star was invincible."

"So we were led to believe," the Emperor agreed.

He peered closely at the man who had spoken. His face was blank, his features composed into a perfect mask of calm loyalty. But there was something beneath the surface. Not betrayal, no. But *something*...the Emperor reached out with the dark side of the Force, probing the man's depths.

"The Rebels found a *weakness*," the Emperor said, searching for a reaction that would reveal the truth. "Wisely, they exploited it."

Quickly, he ran through what he knew of the man: Rezi Soresh, of the planet Dreizan, a loyal, if plodding commander, his brilliance blunted by blind obedience. Just as the Emperor preferred it. Cold, ambitious, cautious—not the kind of man to speak up first, or at all, when silence would serve him better. And in the Emperor's presence, silence always served better.

"Were there any...survivors?" Soresh asked. There was a disturbance in the Force as something flared within him, something sharp and bright.

Hope.

*Ab, yes.* It made sense now. Rezi Soresh, husband to Ilaani Soresh, father to Kimali Soresh—or was. Two years before, fresh

## STAR WARS: Target

out of the Academy, Kimali had fallen in with a group of Rebel sympathizers. When the group came under suspicion, his mother had helped him evade arrest. She had procured him the text docs he would need to run away and take on a new identity—and then she revealed the truth to Soresh, giving him the chance to say a final farewell to his son.

Soresh had turned them both in. His reward: a promotion to Commander. His family's reward: a life sentence in the Gree Baaker Labor Camp.

Several prisoner work squads had been assigned to the Death Star, the Emperor now remembered. Among them, the prisoners from Gree Baaker.

The Emperor smiled. "*No* survivors."

Soresh's face remained blank as his hope died. The Emperor suspected that Soresh himself was ignorant of the emotions that roiled beneath his surface. Likely, he thought he had left his family—and his guilt—far behind. The Emperor knew better.

"Only Lord Vader escaped," he added, enjoying the disappointment that filled the room. He of course knew of the petty jealousies directed at his most favored subordinate. No one could hope to understand the bond that existed between a Sith Master and his dark apprentice. Darth Vader had failed him before, and would surely fail again, but he remained the Emperor's only option.

True, if there were another—a being with Vader's power and potential, a Jedi with a susceptible mind and a *healthy* body who could rule by his Master's side—Vader would become disposable. But the Jedi were gone forever. He had seen to that.

"Lord Vader is making his way back to Coruscant," the Emperor said. "And when he returns, we will make arrangements to eradicate the Rebel threat once and for all."

"But sir, why wait?" Captain Thrawn asked. "We know the location of the Rebel base. Surely we can—"

"We *can* do many things," the Emperor said coolly, enjoying the way even Thrawn cowered before his glare. "We *will* bide our

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time. I will not risk generating sympathy for the Rebellion—when it is crushed, it must be crushed *completely*. This does not, however, mean we will do nothing.” He pointed a spindly finger at the line of officers. “You will identify the top Rebel leaders. You will use this knowledge to destroy them, thus ensuring that the Alliance begins to crumble from within. And you will discover the name of the pilot responsible for destroying the Death Star.” The Emperor savored the rage that burned within him at the thought of it. “The pilot *will* die—and whoever makes this possible will find himself richly rewarded.”

Again, he probed the emotions of his officers. Beneath their fear, and their hatred, he sensed loyalty. An eagerness to act. They wanted to please him. But Soresh wanted more than that. He wanted to kill: a bloodlust for the man who had slaughtered his family.

*Good*, the Emperor thought. Loyalty was useful. Vengeance more so.

The officers filed out, followed by the Red Guard, leaving the Emperor alone with his thoughts. Things were proceeding as they should, he realized now. As they *must*.

He would never doubt the power of the dark side of the Force to show him the way forward. The destruction of the Death Star was surely necessary, as it would guide him to this new path.

Darkness was gathering, and the Emperor sensed that this pilot was at the heart of it. The dark side of the Force had brought him to light. The Emperor had only to find him—and the Emperor *would* find him. He knew that with an iron certainty. The pilot would be found. An ordered galaxy would follow.

It was his destiny.

## Chapter Two

**L**uke Skywalker tightened his grip on the lightsaber. Frozen in place, he held his breath, listening.

It was too dark to see, but he could sense *it* out there somewhere, watching him. *Playing* with him. And at any moment—

*PING!*

Luke sprang backward. The shot screamed past, singeing his cheek. He backed up against a tree, then lashed out with the lightsaber. The blue blade whirled up and around in a smooth, glowing arc. But it sliced through empty air.

*PING! PING!*

His heart thudding, Luke whipped the lightsaber from side to side, struggling to block the blasts. He was always an instant too late. He took a deep breath and warned himself not to panic.

*Use the Force, Luke.* He imagined he could hear old Ben Kenobi advising him, but of course it was only his imagination. Ben was dead. Still, Luke tried to feel the Force. Ben had said it was all around him, that he need only reach for it and it would be there.

Luke reached.

Nothing.

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But then: a crackling sound, off to his right. Like a twig being crushed. And something else, a small click. Like a weapon being cocked. Luke lunged to his right, slashing down with the lightsaber in a single, fluid motion. More shots streaked past, and Luke spun around, sweeping the glowing saber from one side to the other, deflecting the spray.

Grinning, Luke raised the lightsaber over his head, ready to deflect the next barrage of fire. But instead of slicing through air, the weapon struck something solid. There was a slow, loud crack. Luke tensed, then—realizing what was about to happen—leaped out of the way.

Too late—again.

The blow came to the back of his head. Luke dropped the lightsaber and went down, slamming hard into the overgrown jungle weeds. A heavy weight landed on top of him, pinning him down. His fingers scraped the ground, searching for the fallen saber, but came up with nothing but dirt.

A soft click, as his assailant readied his weapon.

“Nooo!” Luke screamed. “Don’t—”

Direct hit.

“Ow!” Luke complained. It may have been just a sting burst, but a direct hit to the shoulder still *hurt*. He whipped off his blindfold and glared at R2-D2, who came rolling out from behind the tree, looking as pleased with himself as an astromech droid could look. “Artoo, that’s not fair!” Luke gestured at the tree branch pinning him flat on his back. “I couldn’t block the shot like this, could I? You should have waited for me to get up!”

R2-D2 released a trill of beeps and whistles.

Luke sighed. He’d spent enough time around the droid to guess what he was trying to say. “I know, I know. In a real fight, the enemy wouldn’t wait for me to be ready.” Not to mention that in a real fight, the enemy would be shooting a blaster, rather than sting bursts—and Luke would be dead.



## STAR WARS: Target

Now that Luke could see again, he spotted his lightsaber lying in a puddle of mud. He stretched out an arm for it, but the weapon was just beyond his reach.

*Bring me the lightsaber*, he commanded the Force, searching inside himself for the power to move objects with his mind. *Lightsaber*. But the lightsaber stayed where it was. And Luke stayed where he was. Trapped.

“Come on, Artoo,” he finally said. “Help me out here.”

R2-D2 beeped again, but didn’t move.

Luke sighed. The astromech droid may have been his most loyal companion, but he was also more than a little sensitive. “Okay, I’m sorry I said you weren’t playing fair,” he apologized. “You were just doing what I told you to do. You did a good job.”

The droid beeped happily and rolled toward Luke, nudging the lightsaber into his outstretched hand. Soon Luke had sliced away enough of the heavy bough to climb out from under it. He stood up and dusted himself off.

All around him, the lush green jungle rustled and chirped, alive with the calls of woolamanders and whisper birds, gackle bats, klikniks, and the many other species native to Yavin 4. Luke couldn’t help feeling like they were all laughing at him.

*Better than Han*, he thought, switching off his lightsaber and sliding it back into the holster hanging at his waist. They’d been at the Rebel Base for almost two weeks now—which meant two weeks of fruitless lightsaber practice. And two weeks of being laughed at by Han Solo, who was convinced the lightsaber wasn’t good for anything but slicing swoonsberry bread.

Luke knew Han meant well—and that he was probably right about the lightsaber, at least when Luke was the one wielding it. Still, Luke had decided it might be better to practice in the jungle, with no one to watch him but R2-D2 and the towering Massassi trees. He’d need a lot more practice if he was ever going to be a Jedi Master like Ben Kenobi.

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*Obi-Wan Kenobi*, Luke corrected himself. It was still hard to believe that the strange old hermit was actually the last of the great Jedi Knights—and a friend to Luke’s father.

*I will find a way to follow in my father’s footsteps*, Luke promised himself, resting a hand on his lightsaber. *It’s my destiny*.

But at times like this, that seemed impossible. He felt he would never learn to wield his lightsaber with Ben’s grace and skill. *And even that wasn’t enough for Ben...not in the end*.

Luke shook his head, trying to clear it of the images. Ben’s lightsaber slashing through the air, sizzling with energy as it clashed against the red beam of Darth Vader’s weapon. Ben struggling to match Vader blow for blow—struggling and failing. Ben raising his arms in surrender, meeting Luke’s eyes one last time...Vader’s lightsaber slicing through Ben like he was as insubstantial as air...Ben’s robes falling to the ground, his body vanished...Ben gone.

And Luke alone. Again.

He couldn’t stop to think about all he’d lost, or he might never get started again.

His comlink beeped, driving away the dark thoughts.

“Where are you, kid?” Han’s familiar voice asked. “Leia’s been looking everywhere for you.”

Luke grinned, glad there was no one but R2-D2 and a few mucous salamanders around to see how pleased he was to hear that. Ever since he had rescued Leia Organa—okay, since he *and* Han had rescued her—from the Death Star, Luke had felt a special connection to the Alderaan princess. Unfortunately, Han seemed to feel one, too.

“Then why didn’t *she* call me?” Luke asked.

“Guess Her Highness has better things to do,” Han joked. “Or maybe she’s just afraid to get too close when you’re waving around that lightsaber.”

Luke glared at R2-D2. “How did you know I—?”

“Blame Threepio,” Han said, referring to C-3PO, the protocol droid Luke had acquired back on Tatooine, along with

## STAR WARS: Target

R2-D2. Wherever one went, the other usually followed. Threepio had been more than a little upset that he hadn't been invited along on the jungle training mission. "That bucket of bolts has a bigger mouth than a Whiphid."

"Well, tell Leia you found me, and I'm fine," Luke said, annoyed.

"Tell her yourself, kid," Han said. "General Dodonna's called some kind of top priority meeting back at Base One—and we're the guests of honor."

Thousands of years earlier, the primitive tribe occupying Yavin 4 had erected several enormous temples across the jungle moon. The largest of these, the Great Temple, was a massive, terraced pyramid whose moss-spotted stone walls broke through the clouds. From the outside, it seemed as ancient and weathered as the moon itself, as if a sacred, mystical secret lay within. But the building had recently been restored and modernized, complete with turbolifts, computers, and lookout posts, as befit the nerve center of the Rebel Alliance.

Luke rode the makeshift turbolift to the top floor. He couldn't believe that only a few weeks before he'd been a farm boy on Tatooine, a nobody stranded in a nothing life. Now he was about to enter a meeting with Jan Dodonna, the leader of the Rebel Alliance military. And why not? Luke was, after all, a hero. With the help of his friends, he'd blown up the Death Star. He'd saved Yavin 4, and possibly the Rebellion itself.

Still, when he stepped into the conference room and saw Dodonna, Han, Leia, and a handful of top Rebel leaders staring back at him, he couldn't help it.

He felt like a clueless kid.

General Dodonna barely waited for Luke to sit down before he began speaking. "Our spies have intercepted a coded Imperial transmission, indicating the Empire has no imminent plans to attack Yavin 4."

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“But why?” Leia cut in. “Now that they have our location, it doesn’t make sense that they wouldn’t attack us.”

“Agreed.” Dodonna ran a hand through his bushy beard. “We gave them a nasty surprise when we blew up the Death Star, but we didn’t expect it would take them this long to regroup. They’re planning *something*—but by the time they act, we will have established a new base far from here. I have ships scouring the galaxy for an appropriate location.”

“We’d be happy to help in any way we can, general,” Leia said.

Han shot her a look. *We?* he mouthed.

The general shook his head. “I’m afraid that’s not why I’ve called you here. We learned something else from the transmission. Although they’re not moving on Yavin 4, the Empire *is* determined to retaliate for the blow we struck against the Death Star. They’re planning targeted attacks to take out our top leadership—among others. As you can imagine, there’s one target the Emperor wants most of all.”

As Luke waited for General Dodonna to reveal the target, he suddenly realized that everyone in the room was looking at him. “What?”

“It’s you, kid,” Han said. “Imperial enemy number one.”

“I’m afraid so,” General Dodonna confirmed.

Luke wasn’t sure whether he should feel proud or terrified.

“According to our sources, the Empire doesn’t yet have Luke’s name. As of today, we’re instituting several new security protocols, designed to shield the identities of anyone who might be an Imperial target,” the general explained. “All of your roles in the destruction of the Death Star have been reclassified as top secret. Obviously, your identities are known to most of the Rebels on Yavin 4, but everyone involved understands how crucial secrecy is to the Rebel cause.”

“What happens if the Empire finds out?” Luke asked.

“Don’t you mean *when* they find out?” Han shot back.

## **STAR WARS: Target**

Leia stood up, smacking her hands against the conference table. “Then we face them together, and we defeat them.” She sounded almost eager for the chance.

Luke and Han exchanged a glance. Leia was a former Imperial Senator, a well-known diplomat who—in her official capacity—traveled the galaxy, carrying messages of comfort and peace. But sometimes Luke suspected that deep down, she was the most natural-born warrior of them all.

## Chapter Three

When they emerged from Base One, Chewbacca and the droids were waiting. “Come on, Chewie,” Han said, barely pausing to collect the Wookiee. “Let’s go.”

“Go where?” Luke asked, hurrying after them.

“Where do you think?” Han asked, sounding surprised by the question. “I’m taking myself and my ship—”

Chewbacca roared indignantly.

“Of course, you, too, Chewie. What, you think I’d leave my copilot here to get blasted to bits when the Empire shows up? We’ll jump into hyperspace and be halfway across the galaxy by dinnertime.” Han stopped and turned to Luke, jabbing him in the chest. “And if you’re smart, kid, you’ll come along for the ride. I’ve got to admit, you’re not a half bad pilot. A few sloppy habits, but you could come in handy once we get a little training into you....”

“Not half bad?” Luke repeated. “I could fly better than you blindfolded and with one arm tied behind my back!”

Han just laughed. “Kid, I was outflying wannabe spice smugglers on the Kessel Run at point five lightspeed back when you were still picking up Bantha droppings on Tatooine.”

“I was a good enough pilot to destroy the Death Star,” Luke pointed out.

## STAR WARS: Target

"Lucky shot," Han said. "Happens to the best of us—and the rest of us."

Luke fell silent. He knew Han was just teasing...but he'd managed to hit on Luke's greatest fear. Maybe he'd been meant to make that shot—maybe the Force had steered him toward his destiny, just like Obi-Wan had predicted.

Or maybe it was just dumb luck.

"Luke may be inexperienced," Leia admitted.

"Inexperienced?" Luke repeated in disbelief. So even Leia didn't believe in him?

"But at least he's not running away." Leia glared at Han, daring him to argue.

"Who said anything about running away?" he countered.

Chewbacca barked again, giving Han a pointed look.

"Hey, there's a *difference*," Han insisted. "I never said I'd be sticking around forever, did I? There's no money to be made here—and if I don't pay Jabba back soon, I'm dead. But that does *not* mean I'm running away, Your Worshipfulness. Only cowards run away."

Leia looked skeptical. "So what would you call it?"

"I'd call it being smart."

"You?" Leia smirked. "Smart?"

Han ignored her bait. He turned to Luke, serious for once. "Look, kid, you heard the general in there. The Empire's gunning for you. Only thing to do now is disappear."

"The Empire's gunning for a mystery man," Luke pointed out. "No one knows that I'm the pilot they're looking for."

Han threw up his arms in disgust. "Kid, look around—everyone on this whole moon knows."

"The new security protocols will take care of that," Leia pointed out.

"You trust security protocols if you want," Han said. "I trust my gut. And my gut says when this many people know a secret, it won't be a secret for long."

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“Master Luke, I’m inclined to agree with Captain Solo,” C-3PO put in, sounding agitated. “When you say that the Empire is *gunning* for you...well, that sounds like a situation that could end rather unhappily, don’t you think? Perhaps we’d be safer somewhere else, away from all this troublesome fighting.”

R2-D2 let off a long string of beeps.

C-3PO looked infuriated. “That’s all well and good for you to say,” he told the droid, “but some of us are designed for dignified intergalactic summit negotiations, not—” his voice took on a disgusted note “—*space battles*. I am, after all, a protocol droid fluent in over six million forms of communication and equipped with—”

“We know, Threepio,” Luke said wearily. The droid gave some version of this speech at least once a day. “And I’m sorry I got you mixed up in this. But we’re in it now. And I’m not running away, no matter how dangerous it may be. I’m a Rebel, and I’m going to stick around and fight.”

*That’s what a Jedi would do, right, Ben?* he thought. But of course there was no answer. At two crucial moments, he’d thought he heard Ben speak to him from beyond the grave. But it had never happened since.

Luke was beginning to think it may just have been his imagination.

“You see? Luke’s not afraid,” Leia said proudly.

Luke grinned.

“Running away from the guy with the blaster pointed at your head isn’t fear, Your Highness,” Han retorted. “It’s smarts. Or did they not teach you that in princess school?”

“I guess they were too busy teaching us the importance of fighting for what you believe in, even when the cause seems hopeless,” Leia snapped. “Or did they not teach you that in smuggler school?”

“They taught me how to stay alive, princess. And that’s all I’m trying to teach you.”



## STAR WARS: Target

“Oh, my, how lucky I am to have met you!” Leia gushed, affecting a high, fluttery voice. “I don’t know how I managed to make it this long without having a big, strong man like you around to keep me safe.”

Han shrugged. “You said it, princess, not me.”

“Come on, Han,” Luke urged him. “The Rebellion could really use you.”

“I won’t be any good to the Rebellion if I’m dead,” Han said. “And neither will you. We lift off in a few hours—you want to join us, you’re welcome. You want to stick around here? Well...it’s been nice knowing you, kid. You, too, princess,” he told Leia. He held out a hand for her to shake.

She crossed her arms.

Han snorted. “Have it your way. C’mon, Chewie.”

The Wookiee groaned a mournful goodbye as he followed Han to the main hangar deck.

“You don’t think he’ll really leave, do you?” Luke asked, once they were gone. Han might be annoying sometimes, but he was still a good pilot—and a good friend.

Luke didn’t have many of those left.

“I hope he does,” Leia said angrily. “The sooner, the better.”

But Luke suspected she didn’t mean it. Judging from the look on her face, she wanted Han to stick around as much as he did.

Maybe more.

“You don’t think he’s right, do you?” Luke asked nervously.

“Not a chance.”

“There is, in fact, a ninety-four point two percent chance that Captain Solo is correct,” C-3PO pointed out. “Especially if you factor in—”

“Not a chance,” Leia repeated firmly. “I believe in the Alliance. We *will* protect you, Luke. And, you know, I also believe in you.”

“You do?” Luke asked, flushing with pleasure.

“Of course,” Leia said, like it should have been obvious. “You’ve already proven you can stand up to the Empire and

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survive. The Death Star was the most powerful weapon they had. What could be worse than facing that?”

Luke shuddered. “Let’s hope we never have to find out.”

Commander Rezi Soresh had been waiting a long time for an opportunity like this. He knew what everyone thought of him. That he was all brain, no guts. That he was quick to obey but slow to initiate. He knew they laughed at him, as people had always laughed—and so they would pay, as people always paid. Even Ilaani had laughed at him, as if she—

No, he thought. He would not think of the traitor or her son. Not at a time like this. He had work to do. This new mission was his chance to prove himself to the Emperor, once and for all. Once he stood by the great man’s side, there would be no more laughter.

None of the Emperor’s officers could match Rezi’s ambition, his intelligence, his determination. And certainly none could match his loyalty. The Emperor’s goals were his goals; the Emperor’s desires, his desires; the Emperor’s will, his will. The Empire was his life.

And he had proven that like no one else.

Now he would prove it again, so thoroughly and so impressively that no one, not even the Emperor, would be able to ignore him. And no one would be able to laugh.

The comlink beeped with an incoming transmission. Soresh put it up on the viewscreen.

Hollow gray eyes stared out at him, deep set in a pale, angular face. The shaved head had been replaced by a shock of black hair, which made the man look more human.

Looks could be deceiving.

The man didn’t speak. He merely waited for orders; he’d been well-trained.

“I have a job for you,” Soresh said.

The man nodded, still waiting.

## STAR WARS: Target

"It's too sensitive to discuss over a comm channel," Soresh told him. "How quickly can you get to Coruscant?"

"I have something to finish here," the man said. "Then I'll have to track down a ship." His voice was empty of emotion. Like his face, it was blank, almost machine-like. As if he were a droid pretending to be human, and doing a poor job of it. But Soresh, who knew him better than anyone, knew there were no mechanical parts hiding beneath the surface.

Beneath the surface there was...nothing. He sounded hollow because he was. Soresh knew this—he'd made sure of it.

"I can be there in three days," the man said.

"Make it one." Soresh flipped off the comlink without waiting for an answer. He knew the man would obey. Soon he would arrive on Coruscant, and then Soresh would sic the hunter on his prey.

At the thought of it, an odd shiver of foreboding ran up his spine. There was no reason for concern. It was a foolproof plan, guaranteed to work. And yet...

He had the dark feeling that he had just sealed his own doom. The man with the hollow eyes was trained to kill—he knew nothing else but the joy of the hunt. And soon he would have the pilot who'd destroyed the Death Star in his blaster sight. So why did Soresh feel he'd just signed his own death warrant?

*So be it*, he thought, imagining his inner voice traveling across the dark emptiness of the galaxy and whispering in the pilot's ear. *Then you and I shall die together.*

## Chapter Four

*We are nothing,” he repeats, as he is told. The light blinds him. He opens his eyes wide against the pain. “We are no one.”*

*“You belong to me,” the Commander says.*

*“We belong to you.”*

*They are seven. But they are one.*

*One in mind. One in obedience. One in life.*

*They are no one.*

*“Count off,” the Commander says.*

*The young men obey. “X-1!” shouts the first. “X-2!” the second. And down the line.*

*He waits. And then, “X-7!” he shouts.*

*The lights blink out. Darkness.*

*“Time to sleep,” the Commander says.*

*X-7 braces for the blow. It is always sooner than he expects, always harder. Pain blossoms from the back of his head, blots out the world.*

*Time to sleep.*

Once he’d plotted the course to Coruscant, X-7 stretched out on his bunk, staring at the ceiling. The Preybird starfighter had seen better days, and it wasn’t much for comfort or show, but the autopilot would take him where he needed to go. At least, that’s what the Rodian had boasted, before he died.

## STAR WARS: Target

*No need to go anywhere now, my friend, X-7 had told the Rodian lying lifeless at his feet. So I'm sure you won't mind if I take her for a spin.* Then he'd holstered the blaster and lifted off.

The Commander wanted him on Coruscant within a day. And what the Commander wanted, the Commander received.

For X-7, these were words to live by.

Literally.

*The stun cuffs pin him against the durasteel wall. The light pierces his eyeballs, and the figure facing him is nothing more than a shadow.*

*But he knows it is the Commander. It is always the Commander.*

*He does not struggle. He only waits for this moment to pass, and then the next. He dreads the future; the past is forbidden. The present is his only home.*

*"Who are you?" the Commander asks.*

*"I am X-7."*

*"What is your purpose?" the Commander asks.*

*"To serve you."*

*"To what end?" the Commander asks.*

*"To serve the Empire."*

*"Where do you come from?" the Commander asks.*

*"From nowhere."*

*Pain. Everywhere at once. It is born inside of him, exploding out of him, and then it is gone.*

*"Where do you come from?" the Commander asks again.*

*"I cannot remember." He gives the answer the Commander wants to hear.*

*Pain. Greater now, more intense, like a knife hollowing him out.*

*"Liar!" the Commander roars. "Have you not yet learned it is impossible to lie to me?"*

*The sensors on his forehead take measure of his thoughts, his emotions. He has no secrets from the Commander. He has no secrets.*

*"What do you remember of your past?" the Commander presses him.*

*"Nothing," he gasps, already anticipating the pain that follows in the next instant. The explosion in his brain casts a shadow of darkness, and for*

## Alex Wheeler

*a blissful moment, he is lost. But the Commander calls him back, jolts him awake.*

*He wants to obey. He wants to blot out his memories, to empty himself of the past. He struggles to erase it all.*

*He has no name. No history. His life is blank. He remembers nothing but these walls, the light, the Commander's voice. Pain. Almost nothing...but.*

*There are images. A small girl, blond, with an innocent smile. A grassy hill, and just beyond it, a lake, cool and refreshing. Two suns blazing against a violet sky. A woman's voice. A hand on his forehead, soft and warm. He wants to forget...but not as much as he wants to remember.*

*They are only images; they are all he has left.*

*"Tell me what you remember," the Commander says. His finger twitches over the switch that will bring the pain.*

*He would rather die than survive another jolt. And they will not let him die.*

*"I remember...a girl," he says softly. "She is my..." Sister? Friend? Daughter? But the memory will not come. Only her face. Only her smile. "She is mine," he tells the Commander.*

*The Commander smiles. "Not anymore."*

The hours crept by as X-7 drew closer and closer to Coruscant. X-7 knew, because he had done extensive research on "ordinary" behavior, that most beings would feel the need to fill the time. They would fiddle with a datapad, play a game of dejarik, even gaze out the window at the emptiness of space. And when necessary, X-7 would do the same. On a mission, he was well-equipped to fit in.

But alone, he had no such need. He had stripped the mattress from his bunk. The rigid durasteel against his back felt comfortably familiar. He appreciated these hours, alone in space. So much of his life was a careful act. Isolated moments like this came as a relief. He could drop the mask and exist as he was: empty.

## STAR WARS: Target

No one in the galaxy had ever seen X-7 like this, his true self exposed. No one but the Commander, of course, who knew him inside and out.

As he should: the Commander had made him.

*He faces the Commander as an equal, though they will never be equals. There are no more restraints, no more sensors, no more neuronics binders to inflict punishing pain. They are well beyond this. He sits on one side of the desk, the Commander on the other. He waits.*

*“Congratulations, X-7,” the Commander says. He holds out a hand, and X-7 knows to shake it. He has been well-trained. He can act human.*

*The Commander tells him he is human.*

*The Commander tells him that the lessons he’s learned—how to smile, how to laugh, how to imitate sorrow or fear or joy—are things he used to understand instinctively. That he once was a being like other beings, soft and stupid.*

*He feels sorry for that other self.*

*He is grateful to the Commander for eliminating it.*

*“I have to admit, I always thought X-3 would be the one,” the Commander says, shaking his head. “He seemed somehow...impervious.”*

*But he had not been impervious to X-7’s vibroblade in their final training bout.*

*X-1 and X-6 had been easily dispatched. X-2 had malfunctioned, tried to escape. X-5 had malfunctioned as well, begun muttering about alliances, encouraged the others to see the Commander as their enemy. That was before X-7’s emotions had died away—he had been able to enjoy the kill. X-4 hung himself with a laser whip.*

*And then there was one.*

*“They were your friends, once,” the Commander says. “Your partners in our exciting new venture. You feel no sorrow over their deaths?”*

*He knows the Commander is testing him, but they are beyond tests now. He feels no anxiety—he has nothing to hide.*

*“I feel nothing,” he says honestly, “but the desire to obey.”*

## Alex Wheeler

*The Commander nods. "You're ready. There's just one last thing. I want to introduce you to someone." He presses a button on his console, and a screen rises from the desk.*

*A face appears.*

*His head is shaved. Young, barely more than a child, but with the eyes of a man, stone gray and cruel. His thin lips are pressed together, a flat line running parallel to the single crease in his forehead. His skin is purpled with fading bruises, and a network of thin scars spiders across his scalp. "Recognize him?" the Commander asks.*

*X-7 shakes his head.*

*The man on the screen shakes his head.*

*X-7 opens his mouth to speak.*

*The man on the screen opens his mouth to speak.*

*X-7 understands.*

*The Commander sees it in his eyes, presses a button, and the mirrored screen drops back into the desk. X-7 realizes this was the final test.*

*He has passed.*

*He is ready.*

Since X-7's last trip to Coruscant, the Commander had switched offices. He was now located midway up a towering spire in the planet's wealthiest quadrant. But this office was identical to the other, lacking in any personal effects. The spare space contained only a desk, a single shelf, and a wall-sized viewscreen.

"Welcome," the Commander said, gesturing for X-7 to take a seat.

There had been a time when the Commander had been the only being he knew. His face had filled X-7's world. Now, many missions later, after traveling the galaxy and encountering beings of all kinds, X-7 understood that the Commander was unusually thin and weak. His watery eyes, his pinched features, his stooped shoulders—they were not the mark of an intimidating man.

X-7 saw all this objectively, as he saw everything objectively. He saw the being before him as others saw him. *Rezi Soresh*, he thought, testing the name in his mind, trying to fit it to the man.



## STAR WARS: Target

But it was no use. The man before him would always be the Commander, the center of his universe. Pleasing the Commander was all he needed in life; disappointing the Commander was death. He understood now that this was not natural. This was not the way other beings lived. Other beings had desires of their own, names, identities, histories. X-7 had no name, only a designation, like a droid. Other men had free will, while X-7 had only Soresh.

He knew this to be true, and he knew that Soresh had done this to him. But knowing the truth changed nothing.

X-7 had free will as well—and, like all other beings, he willed himself to be happy.

Happiness was obeying Soresh.

The Commander passed a datapad across the desk. “A valuable piece of Imperial property has been destroyed by the Rebel scourge. Your target is the pilot who fired the fatal blow. You will infiltrate the Rebel Alliance, gain proof of his identity, and report back. The datapad contains everything we’ve got on the Alliance. Operations, security protocols, personnel data—everything.”

X-7 nodded.

“You will arrange to be in a position to kill him, on my command,” the Commander continued. “You will cast the blame on someone else, so that *you* can remain at the heart of the Alliance. Everything they know, you will know. And everything you know, I will know.”

“For how long?” X-7 asked.

The Commander smiled. “Until the pilot is dead and the Rebel threat has been eliminated.”

X-7 rose, tucking the datapad securely into his utility pouch. “It will be done.”

## Chapter Five

The situation is more dire than even you know, princess,” General Dodonna said, his expression sorrowful.

When the general requested a walk through the lush temple grounds, Leia had expected nothing more than an evening of polite conversation. But the general obviously had more serious concerns on his mind—concerns that he preferred to keep between the two of them.

“A substantial portion of the Rebellion’s funds were located on Alderaan,” the general said.

Leia flinched at the name of her home planet. Just hearing the word sent a shockwave through her. Beautiful, peaceful Alderaan, blasted into a billion pieces of space rubble. Every being on the planet ground to dust. Millions of lives lost in a heartbeat.

In *her* heartbeat, as she stood on the bridge of the Death Star, helpless to stop it. There was nothing she could have done, she knew that.

And yet she still hated herself for it. For doing nothing—while her planet, her past, her own *father*, were lost forever.

She forced the memories back inside herself, not wanting to reveal her weakness to General Dodonna.

## STAR WARS: Target

“The funds, along with several key financial access codes, were lost with the destruction of the planet,” the general continued. “We find ourselves in dire straits. Of course, the Rebellion lives and breathes through the sacrifices of its brave fighters, but...” He sighed. “I’m afraid we must not lose sight of the more practical concerns. Without sufficient funding, we’ll have no ships, no weapons, no defenses, and no hope of establishing a new base.”

“*All* the funds were housed on Alderaan?” Leia asked, surprised that the Rebellion leadership would have been so foolhardy.

The general shook his head. “This is why I wanted to speak with you. We have a set of secret accounts on the planet Muunilinst.”

Leia started in surprise. Although the InterGalactic Banking Clan had been disbanded, Muunilinst, its former home, was still the financial heart of the galaxy. *And* an Imperial stronghold. Thanks to their financial skills, the Muuns were one of the few alien species actually tolerated—and even respected—by the Empire. But Leia knew there was still a strong Imperial presence on the planet.

“It will be dangerous to retrieve the funds,” General Dodonna admitted. “But it must be done. Our contact on the planet, Mak Luunim, is holding a datacard containing the access codes. Once you’ve retrieved them, he’s agreed to help you transfer the accounts offworld and get you safely off the planet.”

“Get *me* safely off the planet?”

“You’re the only one I trust for a mission like this, princess.”

Not so long ago, in what seemed like another life, Leia had preferred to be addressed by her other title, senator. Proud as she was of her royal birthright, she was even prouder of the hard work and determination that had gained her a seat in the Galactic Senate. Now, however, the titles seemed interchangeable. The Senate had been; Alderaan was gone. And the person she’d

## Alex Wheeler

been—the peace-loving princess, the silver-tongued senator—that was gone, too.

“General Rieekan’s expecting me on Delaya, in the Alderaan system,” Leia reminded him. A group of Alderaan survivors—beings who had been offworld when the Death Star attacked—had begun to assemble there. Leia was eager to join them. She had told General Dodonna that she hoped the survivors might agree to join the Alliance—and this was true. But she also felt a deep need to be with her people, and not just because she was their leader.

They were all she had left of her homeworld. They needed her—but she needed them just as much.

“If all goes well, this should be an easy mission, in and out,” the general said. “You can go directly from Muunilinst to Delaya. That is, if you’re willing.”

“Of course, general.” This was the only possible response. Whatever the Alliance asked of her, Leia would give.

“Excellent. I’ve already arranged transportation—you’ll leave tomorrow evening. Mak Luunim is expecting you. And Luke.”

“Luke?”

“I thought it might be best for him to accompany you. He’s certainly proven himself as willing and able to assist the cause.”

*And you want him off Yavin 4, in case the Empire comes looking for him,* Leia thought. But she couldn’t disagree—and she would be glad to have Luke with her. It would have felt wrong to leave him behind.

*Why is that?* she asked herself. She barely knew Luke, and yet in the short time they’d been together, he had come to be important to her. More than that, he seemed almost a part of her. *And he’s not the only one,* she thought. Han’s infuriating grin flashed across her mind.

Leia shook her head, trying to brush away the image.

*Focus on the Rebellion,* she reminded herself. *Nothing else matters.*

“I won’t let you down, general,” she assured him.

“You never do.” He rested a hand on her shoulder, favoring her with a smile. Leia stiffened, suddenly reminded of her father. She had lived for the moments he’d smiled at her like that, loving and proud.

She would never see that smile again.

Once Leia briefed Luke on the mission, they headed to the spaceport. It was always a good idea to rendezvous with the pilot before a mission, especially since they only had one day to formulate a strategy and assemble supplies. As they approached the hangar deck, Leia spotted Chewbacca wheeling a cart of lubricant hoses toward the *Millennium Falcon*. As always, the dilapidated Corellian freighter appeared to be held together with tape and good luck—but Leia knew from experience that it was tougher than it looked.

Han, leaning against the *Falcon*’s aft hull, offered them a jaunty wave.

“What are you still doing here?” Leia asked sourly.

“Waiting for my passengers.” Han flashed that incredibly annoying smirk of his. “Don’t worry, once Chewie finishes tweaking the hyperdrive, he’ll lay out a banquet fit for a princess. I know how you royal folks like to travel in luxury.”

Chewie let out a long, warbling whine.

Han rolled his eyes. “I *know* food service isn’t part of your job description, you furry oaf.” He leaned toward Leia and lowered his voice to a loud whisper. “That’s the problem with Wookiees—can’t take a joke.”

As Chewie roared in protest, Leia forced herself not to smile. She knew Han was just trying to get a reaction out of her, and she wasn’t about to comply. “What makes you think I’m going anywhere with you?”

Han shrugged. “No one’s forcing you, Highness. If you changed your mind about going to Muunilinst, that’s your business.”

## Alex Wheeler

Luke's eyes widened. "*You're* our transportation to Muunilinst?"

Han gave him a mock salute. "At your service."

"Thanks but no thanks, flyboy." Leia shook her head. "This isn't your fight, remember? I'm sure you have better things to do—on the other side of the galaxy."

For a second, Han looked wounded. Leia felt guilty. She didn't *mean* to say things like that to him—they just popped out whenever he was around. If only he wasn't so *infuriating*. There was just something about him. She often wished she'd never met him—but deep down, a rebellious part of her didn't want him out of her sight.

Han scowled. "Look, Your Worship, you know this bird's the fastest and fiercest in the galaxy. You want to get somewhere, the *Millennium Falcon's* the way to go."

"And what's in it for you?" Leia asked suspiciously.

"Nothing," Han said.

Chewbacca yowled, and Han shot him an annoyed glare. "Okay, fine, so there's a little something in it for me, but it's barely enough to pay for the fuel. Then I'll drop you two on Delaya, and you never have to see me again."

"I knew it!" Luke said, sounding overjoyed. "You can talk all you want about walking away from the Rebellion, but when it comes right down to it, you're on our side."

"Hey, slow down," Han protested. "I'm just flying you from point A to point B. Trust me, it's not because I'm joining your nutso Rebellion."

Luke shook his head. "Say what you want, but I know you believe in this fight and want to help."

Leia looked at Luke in amazement. He sounded so sure. Like he could look straight through Han and see the truth of his soul. Leia wondered what it would be like to be so certain about people—to look at them without doubt or suspicion. Some might call Luke naive, but there was something bold in his willingness to trust his instincts.

Even when they were wrong.

“I appreciate the vote of confidence, but you’ve got me figured all wrong,” Han said, sounding almost sorry.

“I’m not wrong.” There was an unusually steely note in Luke’s voice, different from his usual young, questioning tone. “I know you, Han. I can see the good in you, even if you can’t.”

“Not everyone has a good side, kid. Not everyone’s like you.” Han glanced at Leia. They were alike in this, she realized—both of them saw the danger in Luke’s willingness to trust. And maybe both of them envied it. “The sooner you figure that out, the longer you stay alive.”

## Chapter Six

He would begin with Leia.

X-7 had no doubts about his plan. Princess Leia Organa was the public face of the Rebellion, but the Empire's informants suggested she was more than that. She was a key decision-maker, a diplomat, a leader—she would know the name of the pilot who destroyed the Death Star. And she would have access to him.

As the Preybird hurtled toward the Rebel Base, X-7 skimmed the datapad, soaking in every piece of information that existed on Leia Organa. His training had given him the ability to read and memorize information with great speed, and soon he had become an expert on the Alderaan princess. Everything the Empire knew about Leia, X-7 knew.

He knew what she liked and what she hated. What she respected. *Whom* she respected.

And that was the person he would become.

Yavin 4 loomed in the viewscreen, the jungle moon awash in swirls of blue and green.

The comm console lit up with an incoming transmission. "You are entering restricted territory," the scratchy voice warned.

"Request clearance for landing."

The replay came as expected. "Landing code required."



## STAR WARS: Target

X-7 recited the code he'd been given by the Commander, and armed his laser cannons. He'd been assured that the Rebel codes were only a few months old, and that the spy who'd delivered them could be trusted. Still, he believed in being prepared.

"Permission granted. You may land when ready."

X-7 smiled. Not because he was happy, but because expressing the emotion he couldn't feel was good practice. Soon he would be one of them.

"Nice and slow," the man said, cocking his blaster as X-7 stepped through the hatch of the Preybird. "And let's keep your hands where I can see them."

So they hadn't been fooled by the landing code after all. *Smart*, X-7 thought in approval. Allowing him to land and let his guard down before revealing themselves as a threat. This way, if he turned out to be an enemy, they could destroy him without destroying his ship.

Of course, their strategy assumed that he was more dangerous behind the firing controls of a laser cannon than he was on the ground.

It was a poor assumption.

The Yavin 4 hangar deck was a hub of bustling activity. X-wing fighters set off for missions while others limped onto the tarmac, bruised and battered. Maintenance droids and deck officers raced from ship to ship, scavenging parts from one to fix another, refitting and refueling with efficient haste. X-7 could see with a glance that there were fewer ships than needed, fewer parts, fewer pilots, fewer everything.

It was nearly laughable, the idea that an operation like this could stand up to the Empire. Some might have called it brave. X-7 knew better.

"Careful with that, friend," he told the Rebel guard, nodding at the blaster. "I'd hate for you to accidentally blow a hole through me." He kept his tone casual.

## Alex Wheeler

“Wouldn’t be anything accidental about it,” the guard growled. “Now how about you tell me where you got that landing code.”

“From Lieutenant Jez Planchet,” X-7 said. “He recruited me about six months ago. Gave me orders to bring you a message—and then report for duty. I’m ready to serve the Rebel Alliance, wherever I’m needed.” He was prepared for this. He was prepared for anything.

The guard narrowed his eyes and flicked a finger across his datapad. “So you ran into Planchet on Kashyyyk, eh?”

X-7 forced a thin smile. “Lieutenant Planchet’s been deep undercover on Malastare for the last year. *Sir*.” How amusing that they thought they could trick him. It was like playing a game with a child—carefully manipulating the playing field to give him the illusion that he was among equals.

The guard gave a terse nod. “And you have some kind of proof that you are who you say you are?”

“Actually, I *haven’t* said who I am, yet,” X-7 pointed out. Any respect he might have had was quickly fading. This was no way to run an interrogation. They hadn’t even confiscated his weapons: He could kill half the men in this hangar without breaking a sweat. “S’ree Bonard. Pleased to meet you.” He held out a datapad. “Here are my ID docs, and the data Planchet had me smuggle out. They’re plans for some kind of new Imperial ship. Lieutenant Planchet wanted them to go straight to Dodonna.”

In fact, all Lieutenant Planchet had wanted was a release from the torture he’d endured in his Imperial prison cell. He had indeed spent several months undercover on Malastare, completely cut off from his Rebel allies.

Which meant when the Empire arrived at his door, he had no one to call for help.

And when the Empire’s expert interrogators began their work, he had no hope of rescue.

## STAR WARS: Target

According to the Commander, Planchet had stayed silent at first—but the human body could only tolerate so much pain. In the end, he had yielded all his Rebel secrets, begging only for an end to the torture.

And he was given what he'd asked for.

Dead men felt no pain.

The Rebel perused the datapad carefully. X-7 knew what he would find. Impeccable credentials proving he was S'ree Bonard, a man who'd never existed. Falsified blueprints for a battleship that would never be built. A certifying thumbprint and Alliance codes from Lieutenant Planchet, whose rebellion had ended with a whimper and a bolt of blasterfire. Out-of-date codes, yes—but what more could one expect from a man who'd been undercover for nearly a year?

"This all appears in order," the guard said, the suspicion fading from his voice. "I better get this info to General Dodonna."

"Lieutenant Planchet specifically requested that I deliver the blueprints personally," X-7 said.

The Rebel shook his head. "Not gonna happen. We've got some new security protocols—can't have you leaving the hangar until everything's been checked out."

X-7 feigned disappointment. No need to reveal that the hangar was exactly where he wanted to be. "I've been in that ship for a long time," he complained. "I was really looking forward to a good meal, a hot shower—"

"Trust me, I've been there, pal," the guard cut in. "But we all got to do our part for the Rebellion. And right now, your part is to stay right here until I get you clearance. Understood?"

X-7 nodded. "Understood."

The guard left, promising to return with official clearance within the hour. And X-7 was left to his own devices. Forbidden from leaving the hangar.

Which, of course, was the last thing he wanted to do.

## Alex Wheeler

He sauntered up to a scarred, rusted Corellian cruiser that matched the specs of a ship Leia Organa had been known to use. A team of maintenance droids was working on the starboard dorsal engine while a slim, brown-haired man in a deck officer's uniform struggled with the dorsal rectenna dish.

When he paused, looking around for one of his tools, X-7 tossed him a fusioncutter.

"Trouble with the sensor array?" he asked.

"Trouble with everything," the deck officer grumbled. "Can't believe the piece of junk even flies."

"Maybe it doesn't," X-7 said agreeably. "Ever think about grounding her?"

"Ground the *Falcon*?" The deck officer spliced together a set of wires on the electro photo receptor. "Don't let Solo hear you say that."

"Oh?" *Solo*. X-7 filed the name away, and waited. He preferred not to ask questions. It was more effective to stay quiet and let your target fill the silence.

"I shouldn't even be working on her," the deck officer grumbled. "Solo never lets anyone near her but that Wookiee. Fine with me, I say. But they're off in some *briefing*, just talking, talking, talking, while I'm the one who has to actually *do* something, is all I'm saying. So I'm stuck mucking about in the grease. Like I don't have better things to do than more repairs on a ship that belongs on the junk heap."

"Think you'll get it done by the time they have to leave?" X-7 kept his voice casual. Unconcerned.

"I got a few more hours, and only a couple more repairs to make. Shouldn't be a problem."

"In that case, maybe you've got time to take a look at something for me?" X-7 said, a new plan beginning to coalesce. "Shouldn't take more than a second—I could really use an expert opinion."

The deck officer grinned. "That's all I got, buddy. Besides, be nice to work with someone who actually appreciated me, is all

I'm saying. That Wookiee's always grunting and growling every time I get my wrench near his deflector shield. And last time I was dumb enough try to touch the hyperdrive? Well, lucky I still have both my arms, is all I'm saying."

"It's right over here," X-7 said, leading the deck officer into a secluded corner of the spaceport. A large pile of damaged generators shielded them from view. "I've been having quite a problem."

The deck officer looked confused when X-7 stopped. Except for a few crates of spare parts, the area was empty. "There's no ship here—hey!" His shout faded as the injected nerve toxin took effect. The man was dead before he hit the ground.

X-7 stripped him of his uniform, then slid his body into a crevice in the generator pile where, with any luck, it wouldn't be discovered for days. "Problem solved."

It took only a few minutes to slip aboard the *Millennium Falcon* and access the navigational computer, which had been programmed on a course for Muunilinst. Now he knew where they were headed—and, after making a few modifications to the ship's systems, he knew exactly how he would intercept them.

After that, he needed only to find himself a way off the moon. And what could be simpler? He had the Preybird. He had his blaster.

And moments later, he had a young, terrified Rebel pilot willing to do anything he asked. A blaster muzzle digging into the ribcage tended to have that effect on people. A more experienced soldier might have turned the situation to his advantage, realizing that X-7 couldn't afford to shoot. Not if he wanted to get out alive. A more experienced soldier certainly would have known better than to climb into the Preybird as ordered, and relay the series of codes necessary to gain departure clearance.

A more experienced soldier likely would not have believed X-7's promise. "Do as I say, and I'll let you live."

## Alex Wheeler

But X-7 had chosen well, and this soldier was no soldier at all. He was little more than a scared boy, wearing his uniform like a costume.

And, once he'd served his purpose, he was disposable.

There was no need to use the blaster. The vacuum of space did the job just fine, without leaving behind a bloody mess. As the pilot's body drifted away into the black, X-7 set a course for Muunilinst. It was time to put his plan in motion.

The man he needed proved easy to track down. Soon his pinched, grizzled face was looming on the communicator screen.

"It'll cost you," the pilot said, once he heard X-7's proposal.

"Name your price," X-7 suggested. "My employer has rather deep pockets."

"And you're sure it's safe? Solo's got a reputation, you know. You'd have to be crazy to go up against the *Millennium Falcon*. Especially in a TIE fighter. Those things practically explode if you sneeze on them."

"I've taken care of the *Falcon*. Just show up at the coordinates I've given you. It's completely safe." X-7 smiled, offering up a perfect simulation of candid sincerity. "You have my personal guarantee."

The Muunilinst system was still hours away when X-7 began his transformation. He began with the physical—X-7 had been taught to believe that change happened from the outside in. And his specialized medpac made change easy.

Painful, but easy.

Ignoring the localized nerve anesthetic, he used a small durasteel mallet to crush his nasal bones. He set them with the bone fuser, adding a bump and a slight curve that gave his face a completely different look. Colored lenses turned his eyes a bright green, and a black tattoo across his neck marked him as a member of the A'mari. This was the former ruling class of Malano III, the planet he would claim as his own.

## STAR WARS: Target

The chances of Leia knowing anything about Malano III or the A'mari were low, but X-7 left nothing to chance.

His new identity was that of a warrior, and a warrior needed scars. He raked the sonic scalpel in a jagged line from his left eye to his chin, pleasuring in the pain.

There were easier ways, but he preferred the pain. It kept his mind clear. Reminded him of the stakes.

Reminded him of the Commander, and the only home he'd ever known.

A blaster set on stun, aimed at the chest, the back, the shoulders.

A simple application of bacta, and his false identity was complete: a battle-scarred warrior, fresh from the front lines.

X-7 called up the details of his new persona on the datapad, running his eyes over and over them, although they were already stored in his head.

"Tobin Elad," he repeated aloud, testing the new name on his tongue.

"I am Tobin Elad." He watched himself saying it in a plane of mirrored transparisteel, mastering every twitch of the eye, every quirk of the lips, any and every sign that might give away the lie.

He practiced smiling, lighting his dead eyes with a life that almost seemed real.

He practiced laughing.

He practiced the lie of his humanity until he nearly believed it himself. And then he knew he was ready. X-7 would sink beneath the surface, poised, waiting for Tobin Elad to get the job done. And when he did, X-7 would emerge. And strike.

He wiped the details of his false identity from the datapad and called up the picture of Leia, the one he'd first seen. It was a few years old, from a time before her eyes had taken on their sad, haunted look. She was smiling, her long hair wrapped around her head in an elaborate braid. Her head was inclined slightly forward, as if she were about to share a secret with the holocam.

## **Alex Wheeler**

This was the Leia he planned to target. This Leia still existed, he was sure of it. The younger, sweeter Leia who lived beneath the cynical Rebel. The one who longed to connect with someone who could truly understand her, with whom she could share all her secrets.

“Your wait is almost over, princess,” X-7 whispered, his eyes fixed on her face. “I’m on my way.”



## Chapter Seven

I'm bringing us out of hyperdrive now," Han informed his passengers. "We'll be just outside the Muunilinst system, so it should be smooth sailing from here on in."

"It's about time," Leia complained. "If I have to be stuck in this tin can with you for any longer, I'll scream."

*Stuck with me?* Han thought in frustration. *She* was the one who'd been pestering him the whole trip—*check this, try this, have you thought of that*, and on and on. The princess just didn't know how to keep her mouth shut.

"Feel free to get out here," Han retorted, gesturing to the gleaming strands of stars whipping past the ship. "Say the word and I'll just drop you right out the hatch."

"You'd really do it, wouldn't you?" Leia asked incredulously.

"You bet I would, sweetheart."

Chewbacca growled.

"Oh yes I *would*," Han insisted. "And if you don't stop taking her side, you can go with her, you hairy fuzzball."

Chewbacca yowled.

Han rolled his eyes as he took the ship out of hyperdrive. "Since when are you so sensitive, Chewie? I was just—whoa!" The ship shuddered.

## Alex Wheeler

“What’s happening?” Leia cried, almost tumbling into his lap. She caught herself just in time.

“Someone’s shooting at us, princess. In case you hadn’t noticed.” Han pulled the *Falcon* around, trying to get a glimpse of his attacker. The guy was right on his tail.

Han jerked the ship up, then hard to starboard, dodging another blast of laserfire.

“There’s someone shooting at us!” Luke cried, already scrambling down the tube that led to the ventral quad laser cannons.

“You don’t say.” Han accelerated, trying to get some distance from the attacker—who was a good shot. He took the *Falcon* into a screaming dive, then pulled up, *hard*, drawing level with the enemy. “Gotcha!” he shouted, as the TIE fighter came into view. “Kid, why aren’t we blowing this Imperial slugbrain out of the sky?”

“Something’s wrong!” Even over the staticky comlink, the alarm in Luke’s voice came through loud and clear. “The weapons system is offline.”

“Well, get it *online*!” Han jerked his head at Chewie, but the Wookiee was already on his way, closely followed by R2-D2.

“Sir, might I suggest evasive action?” C-3PO put in.

“Excellent suggestion,” Han said through gritted teeth. He took them into a corkscrew dive. “Wish I’d thought of that myself.”

“Still, we *must* get the lasers back online, Captain Solo,” C-3PO added. The bucket of bolts was just a fount of helpful advice. “Otherwise I’m afraid I estimate our odds at seven thousand, three hundred thirty six to—”

“What did I say about quoting me odds?” Han increased the forward thrust. The ship bucked and shuddered as Imperial laserfire blasted their deflector shield. They were too close to the moons of Muunilinst to safely go into hyperdrive, but if he could get just a little room—

“What are you doing?” Leia asked in alarm.

## STAR WARS: Target

“Running away,” Han snapped. “Unless you still think that’s the coward’s way.”

“No, running away is good,” Leia said quickly. “Let’s go. But why can’t we just go into hyper—” Leia fell silent as a second ship dropped out of hyperdrive.

“Company,” Han said grimly. A rusted Preybird starfighter. No match for the *Falcon*—if the *Falcon* could shoot. He had to get out of there, fast. Their shields couldn’t take another direct hit. And if the deflector system failed, too...

“Wait!” Leia gripped his shoulder. “Look!”

The new ship swooped toward the TIE. Laserfire lit up the sky. The fighter swung sharply to port, returning fire. It scored a direct hit on the Preybird.

“What’s he doing?” Han said, wondering what kind of nut was piloting the ship. “That old ship can’t take that kind of fire.”

The Preybird dodged the next round and unleashed a laser blast of its own. The ships danced around each other, laserfire exploding on all sides. Han could do nothing but watch.

He hated it.

“What’s going on with those laser cannons?” he shouted. This was *his* fight.

“No luck,” Luke called back. “The cannons are jammed and even if we could get them working, we have no targeting capability. The whole system’s gone haywire!”

“Great,” Han muttered. “Just great.”

He swung the ship around and accelerated, heading straight for the TIE fighter.

“What are you doing?” Leia asked, panic filling her voice. “What happened to running *away*?”

“Change of plans,” Han said, pushing the ship faster.

“We don’t have any weapons!”

“Glad you’ve been paying attention.” The TIE loomed in his sights. “But *he* doesn’t know that.”

“That other ship is doing just fine—”

## Alex Wheeler

"I don't know about you, Highness, but I fight my own battles."

"And how, exactly, are we supposed to fight without any weapons?"

The TIE fighter loomed in the viewscreen. They were almost on top of it. "We'll figure that out when we—"

"He's retreating!" Leia exclaimed.

"Of course he is," Han said calmly, trying to disguise his shock. And relief.

The Preybird took off after the fleeing TIE Fighter, firing a single shot to its starboard solar array wing. The Imperial ship exploded.

Han tensed, waiting for the Preybird to make a move. Sure, the other pilot had helped them out of a jam. But in his experience, people only helped you when they wanted something. Maybe this guy wanted his cargo. Or his ship.

"How we doing with those laser cannons?" Han asked nervously.

A transmission came in over the comlink.

"Corellian freighter, this is...request assistance..." Only a few clear words bubbled up through the storm of static. "Damaged my...and power generator...forced to...not sure if I...please send—"

The call cut off abruptly. They watched in horror as the ship belched out a plume of black exhaust, then dipped precariously toward a nearby moon. The Preybird glowed orange with heat as it plummeted through the atmosphere—and then disappeared beneath the clouds.

Leia's eyes widened with horror. "We have to go after him!"

"I thought the only thing that mattered was the *mission*, princess," Han teased, quoting words she'd fired at him a hundred times.

She looked at him in disgust. "He *saved* us. Now he's our responsibility."

## STAR WARS: Target

"Hey, no one asked for his help," Han grumbled. But he'd already set a course for the surface. That was the thing about Leia. She never understood when he was joking. It was almost like she *wanted* to think the worst of him.

*So let her*, he thought. Why should he care?

He shouldn't.

But he did.

It took them almost an hour to find the crash site. Magnetic disturbances in the moon's atmosphere made it difficult to pick up the Preybird's distress beacon until they were right on top of it. But they finally found the ship, or what was left of it. The Preybird lay at the base of a jagged cliffside, smashed nearly to pieces.

Leia caught her breath. "Do you think he's...?"

"Well, I doubt he's having a tea party in there," Han said, keeping his voice light to cover his concern. No reason to upset the others—at least until there was a reason. "But only one way to find out."

The moon was uninhabited, and Han could see why. The air was dense and murky, rich with the scent of oxite. The bluish globe of Muunilinst hung overhead, on the opposite side of the sky from the dim, jaundiced sun. Scrub brush littered the dusty ground, spotting the dirt-gray hills of rock and clay that stretched to the horizon. There was no movement or sound in the heavy air; the world seemed still and dead.

Except.

"There's no one inside," Luke reported, after examining the Preybird wreckage. Black scorch marks scraped across what was left of the hull. "At least we know he's not dead."

"Not yet." Han pointed toward the large, inhuman tracks leading toward and then away from the ship, disappearing into the hills.

A thin groove in the dirt followed the footsteps, as if the creature had dragged something behind it.

The groove was stained with a trail of blood.

## Chapter Eight

**B**lood seeped through the bandage. A crimson stain spread swiftly across his shirt. He'd slashed himself deeper than intended, and could feel the life pumping out of him with each step.

No matter.

They would find him when he was ready to be found. And when that happened, a graver injury could only work in his favor.

No one would ever guess that the gashes had come from his fire blade rather than the crash.

X-7 had waited an hour before activating the distress beacon—and in the meantime, he'd been busy. After laying the trail, he'd doubled back, lying in wait for his “rescuers” to arrive. Now he shadowed them as they followed the tracks he'd laid, leaving the Wookiee and the little R2 droid to guard the ship. He watched closely as the princess forged ahead, the two men scrambling to keep up with her.

So the princess was foolhardy, her friends powerless to stop her from blundering into trouble.

Interesting.

X-7 filed it away for future reference. He tread silently and stayed close. From a few paces behind, he could hear them

## STAR WARS: Target

bickering, could hear the protocol droid complaining, could hear the two men dither over which way to go as the tracks faded.

They didn't look like much of a threat.

Still, X-7 knew better than to trust his first impression. Many men had made that mistake when encountering him. Few lived to make it a second time.

Winning at the pain in his shoulder, he drew out his dart shooter. Took aim at the taller male, and fired.

The man slapped at the back of his neck, then examined his palm, likely looking for the insect that had bitten him. Then shrugged, and continued walking.

X-7 paused, letting them get further ahead.

He didn't want to be too close when the pheromone dart did its job, releasing a scent that would draw the nearest reek. When the beast found a group of humans instead of a potential mate, X-7 suspected it would be rather...displeased.

Once the creature attacked, X-7 would draw closer again, watching them defend themselves. It would be the best way to gauge their weaknesses. And, if the beast was able to slaughter the one exuding the pheromones, so much the better. X-7 would intercede before it could harm the princess.

She could hardly refuse to trust him after that.

There was a faint roar in the distance. A moment later, the ground began to shake.

*Here it comes, X-7 thought. Let the games begin.*

Luke grabbed hold of the nearest boulder, trying to keep his balance as the ground rumbled. "Moonquake?" he asked.

Leia shook her head, pointing a finger over his shoulder. Luke whirled around. A giant beast lumbered toward them on legs thick as tree trunks. Its hunched back rose to nearly three times Luke's height. A horn stuck out of each side of its face, while a third spurted from its forehead, sharp as a knife and thicker at its base than a human torso.

## Alex Wheeler

"It looks like a reek." Luke drew his lightsaber. The Hutts on his home planet sometimes used them as execution animals. "They're mostly herbivores, but..."

"*But?*" Han yelled, lunging out of the way as the reek swiped at him with a trunklike leg.

"But when their skin turns all reddish brown like that, it usually means they've got a taste for meat," Luke admitted.

Han whipped out his blaster and took aim, but the blasterfire bounced off the reek's tough hide. "I'm no one's meat!" he shouted, scrambling up a shallow hill of rocks to get a better angle. The reek lowered its head and charged.

"Get down, princess!" Han called to Leia as he dove out of the way just in time. She ducked behind the nearest rocky outcropping. C-3PO was already cowering beneath it. Leia elbowed him aside and began blasting at the reek with her laser pistol.

Han fired again, but the reek only grunted, charging straight through the blaster bolts.

Luke raised his lightsaber, but froze. What good was a lightsaber against a creature like this? Even if he could get close enough to strike, he'd probably be crushed before he could do any good.

*A lightsaber is the only weapon a Jedi needs,* Ben had told him.

*Easy for Ben to say,* Luke thought now. *He knew how to use it.*

"Forget the toy!" Han yelled, running at full speed from the lumbering reek. He paused every few seconds to turn back and shoot, aiming for a different spot each time, in hopes of finding a weakness in the thick hide. But it was no use, and the reek showed no signs of tiring. "Blast the thing before it has me for dinner!"

"The blasters aren't hurting it!" Luke shouted back. At the sound of his voice, the reek turned around, as if noticing him for the first time. It grunted, stomped, and then took off for Luke. It was too close, and coming too fast. He couldn't get out of the way.



## STAR WARS: Target

Luke fumbled for his blaster, but it got caught in its holster. The reek drew closer.

"Hey, what about me?" Han yelled, trying to distract it again. "Dinner's this way, you horn-faced jerk!"

But the reek was fixed on Luke.

He knew if he tried to run, he could be trampled beneath the beast's mammoth feet before he got more than a few paces. So he held his ground. He raised his lightsaber, focusing on the shimmering blue blade, trying to block out his fear.

Luke remembered Han's strategy with the TIE fighter. *I may not be strong enough to kill the reek*, Luke thought, *but the reek doesn't know that*.

He ran *toward* the beast.

"Luke!" Leia screamed. "No!"

Luke stumbled over a large rock bulging out of the dirt. He hurtled wildly through the air, blade outstretched, and landed with a thump a few feet away, flat on his face. A keening howl split his eardrums, and then, with a thunderous crack, the world seemed to crumble beneath him.

A moment later, all was silent and still.

Luke rolled over and looked up at the concerned faces of his friends. "I'm not dead," he said in confusion.

Han laughed, but Luke could see the concern beneath the smile. "Don't sound so disappointed, kid."

Luke sat up, his head throbbing. "What happened?"

"You tripped and fell flat on your face," Han said.

"Yeah, that part I remember." He rubbed the back of his head, then twisted it from side to side, freezing as he caught sight of the mighty reek, *dead*.

"Oh. Right," Han said, following his gaze. "There was also the part where your lightsaber sliced our friend here wide open. Poor guy was just trying to get a snack."

"That 'poor guy' nearly had us all for a three-course meal!" Leia exclaimed, giving Han a light smack on the shoulder. She tugged Luke up off the ground. "Are you sure you're okay?"

## Alex Wheeler

Luke couldn't take his eyes off the reek. He'd really done it, he'd saved the day—with his *lightsaber*.

If only he hadn't done it by accident.

"Master Luke, I think I've picked up the trail again," C-3PO reported, gesturing to the bloody footsteps that tramped further into the hills. Luke shuddered. Now that he knew what kind of creature was responsible for those tracks, he was even more worried about the fate of the injured pilot. They had to find him before it was too late.

For almost half an hour, they followed the trail across the rocky landscape. It ended at the mouth of a cave. Han and Luke exchanged a glance. Luke guessed they were both thinking the same thing: *something* had gone into that cave. Probably something they didn't want to meet. Leia gave them both a disgusted look, then strode inside.

"After you," Han said dryly. But he hurried after her. Luke followed.

"If it's all the same to you, I'll just wait out here, Master Luke," C-3PO called. "I think I can be of the most service if I..." His voice faded away as they penetrated deeper into the dark cave.

"I think I see something," Leia whispered, striding ahead.

"Yeah, but does it see *us*?" Han muttered.

There was a body sprawled against the far wall of the cave. Leia hurried over, kneeling by its side. Luke and Han approached more slowly, keeping an eye on the mouth of the cave.

The man was bloodied and pale, but his eyes were open. "You shouldn't have followed me," he rasped, struggling to breathe. "It's coming b—" He broke off into a fit of coughing. "This is where it li—" He exploded into more coughs, then fell backward, exhausted by the effort.

"What's he trying to say?" Han asked.

Sensing a familiar rumble beneath his feet, Luke drew his lightsaber. "I think he's saying, *This is where it lives!*" he cried, as a

## STAR WARS: Target

reek burst into the cave. Leia flung herself across the wounded pilot, shielding him with her body. Han grabbed his blaster.

The reek lowered its horn and charged.

“Blasting it doesn’t work!” Luke complained. “Let me handle this.”

“You had so much fun the first time?” Han shot back. “That was just a fluke. Keep out of the way and try not to get yourself hurt.”

“But if you shoot that off in here, you’ll—” Before Luke could finish, Han pulled the trigger, aiming for the mouth of the cave. Blaster fire ricocheted off the roof, dislodging a hail of giant rocks that rained down on the reek’s head. The beast went down in a heap.

“See, kid?” Han said triumphantly. “I told you I’d...”

He broke off as the ceiling continued to crumble, an avalanche of rocks tumbling down. They pressed themselves against the cave wall as clouds of dust billowed up from the massive collapse.

Moments later, the thunder of falling rocks died away. The dust cleared. And a wall of solid rock blocked off their only escape.

“...handle it,” Han finished in a weak voice.

They were trapped.

## Chapter Nine

Don't you look at me like that," Han warned the others, as they turned to glare at him. "It's not my fault!"

"Oh, really?" Leia said dryly.

"Look, princess, I don't know what it's like where you come from, but where *I* come from, you *shoot* the giant scaly monster that's trying to eat you." As he spoke, Han ran his hands along the wall of rock, searching an opening. If he could just pry a few of the rocks loose, he might be able to dig them out.

But hard as he tugged, none of the rocks would budge. They were wedged solid.

"I didn't have a choice," Han insisted, aware that he was getting dangerously close to whining. "What did you want me to do?"

"You could have let *Luke* handle it, like he asked," Leia pointed out.

"The kid and his glorified nerf-steak knife?" Han gaped at Leia. Was she *crazy*? "We'd all be reek feed by now!" He paused, glancing at Luke, who was standing off to the edge of the cave, his back to the rest of them. Probably practicing some kind of Jedi meditation trick. Luke always picked the strangest times to go all mystical on them. "No offense."

"Offense taken," Luke murmured, concentrating on whatever foolish thing he was doing.

Han turned back to the princess, who was still tending to the wounded pilot. If she would just let him *explain* what he'd been thinking...

*You weren't quite thinking, buddy*, said an annoying voice in his head. *That's the problem*. He ignored it.

"Look, C-3PO's out there," Han said. "Maybe he'll be able to dig us out."

Leia didn't have to say anything, she just looked at him. Han sighed. "Fine. Then I'm sure he'll go get Chewie. A Wookiee is just what we need." The comlinks weren't working, thanks to all the magnetic interference, but surely the droid would figure out what to do on his own. "He's probably on his way back to the ship right now...unless he stopped to impress a reek with one of his six million languages," Han added under his breath. "Or fell in a ditch."

Leia glared. "If we die in here, I'll kill you."

Han opened his mouth to point out that didn't make any sense...but stopped himself just in time. "We're not going to die, Your Highness," he assured her. "I'm sure even you can get by for a few hours without your ladies-in-waiting, or whatever it is you princesses need to survive."

"Maybe *I* can," she snapped, "but *he* can't." She nodded toward the injured man, lying in a pool of blood. "I've done what I can for him here, but the wound is bleeding out of control. We have to get him back to the ship. A few hours might be too long."

The pilot groaned. "That's some bedside manner you have there," he said.

Han arched an eyebrow at Leia. She scowled. "I thought he was unconscious!" she said, defensively.

"You're quite the medical expert," Han teased.

"I'd suggest *you* take over," Leia shot back, "but you'd probably try to *blast* him back to health."

## Alex Wheeler

"Hey!" Han protested. But Leia turned her back to him, murmuring something comforting to the pilot.

"Some rescue attempt," the man complained, his voice weak.

"Try a little gratitude," Han suggested. If he was strong enough to dish it out, he was strong enough to take it. "We're the ones doing *you* a favor."

"A favor might have been letting me rescue myself," the man said.

Han snorted. "Yeah, you were doing a great job, lying here on the floor of the cave waiting to get eaten. *Brilliant* plan."

"Reeks are herbivores," the pilot said, in a superior tone.

Han *hated* superior tones. "Funny, I guess no one told that guy," he said, gesturing toward the definitely carnivorous reek lying dead on the floor of the cave. "Face it, buddy, if it weren't for me, you'd be lunch."

"You're right." His voice broke off into another coughing fit. "*This* is a definite improvement."

"Han, leave the poor man alone," Leia said angrily. "He needs his rest."

"Me?" Han asked, incredulous. "*He* started it."

Leia shook her head. "I know you have the *mind* of a five year old, but that's no reason to act like one."

"You—! How can you—? I—!" Han sputtered, searching for the perfect response.

Finally, he told himself it wasn't worth it. He turned to Luke, who was fumbling with his lightsaber over on the far end of the cave. "How about you? Don't you want to tell me what I'm doing wrong?"

Luke offered up a serene smile. "Actually, I was thinking I might get us out of here...unless you two aren't done arguing yet?"

Leia looked up, surprised. "You can get us out of here?"

"He's bluffing," Han said confidently. Then he took a closer look at Luke. "You're bluffing, right?"

Ignoring him, Luke strode toward the wall of rock blocking their exit, and plunged his glowing lightsaber into the pile. It sliced through the rocks like they were made of air. “I tested it first,” Luke explained, “to make sure the beam was strong enough—and to make sure it wouldn’t just cause the rocks to cave in even more.”

“Thinking before you act,” Leia said, giving Han a pointed look. “Imagine that.”

Luke began cutting through the rock, methodically working the saber back and forth to carve out an opening. It was slow going, and Han could see it was going to take a while—but it would work.

“Good thinking,” he said. Luke was a little clueless some of the time—okay, most of the time. But Han had to admit it: The kid came through in a pinch.

“I *told* you the lightsaber was a valuable weapon,” Luke said.

“Hey, don’t get ahead of yourself,” Han argued. “Slicing and dicing a pile of rocks doesn’t exactly qualify something as a *weapon*. It’s no blaster.”

“Lucky for us,” Luke pointed out.

Han grimaced. “If you’re going to keep throwing that back in my face every time I—”

“Not to interrupt,” the pilot interrupted, “but less arguing and more cutting would probably be—” He broke off abruptly.

“Probably be what?” Han asked irritably. What made this guy think he could tell them what to do?

“He’s out cold,” Leia said, concern filling her voice. “Luke, you’ve got to hurry! We have to get him back to the ship *soon* or...”

She didn’t finish, but she didn’t have to.

Han joined Luke’s side, pushing rocks out of the way as Luke’s glowing blade widened the opening. He’d seen men lose that much blood before, and he knew what it meant. That pilot had to return to the ship soon—or he wouldn’t be going anywhere at all, ever again.

## Chapter Ten

Leia rested a hand gently on the pilot's forehead. He was still so pale, but at least the fire no longer burned beneath his skin. They had brought him back to the ship and soaked his wounds in bacta, but beyond that there was little they could do for him. The *Millennium Falcon* was equipped with only the most basic medical provisions.

As Han, Luke, and Chewbacca worked to put the weapons systems back online, Leia had sat by the anonymous pilot's bed, waiting for him to wake up. It had been nearly a day.

*We don't even know who he is,* Leia thought, watching his eyeballs twitch faintly beneath his lids. *If he dies out here, no one who loves him will ever know what happened.*

She tried not to think about it. After all, his pulse was strong. His wounds were healing. There was no reason to think he wouldn't make a full recovery.

If he ever woke up.

They owed him so much, she thought. He'd saved them from certain death at the hands of the Empire. Whoever he was, whatever his motives, there was no escaping that truth. They owed him.

"But if you want us to pay you back, you're going to have to wake up," she murmured.



"You drive a hard bargain."

Leia started in surprise, jerking her hand away from his forehead. "You're awake!"

"Seems that way." He smiled, and tried to sit up, groaning at the effort.

Gently, she pushed him back down to the bunk. They were in a cramped room just off the main hold, where Han had stored his meager medical supplies. "Easy," she told him. "You lost a lot of blood."

He grimaced. "That wasn't part of the plan."

"What plan?"

A strange, blank look flashed across his face, and then it was gone, so quickly that Leia thought she might have imagined it. Especially when he smiled. His eyes sparkled with good humor, and some of the color seemed to come back into his face. "The plan where I rescue the fair maiden and reap her eternal gratitude."

Leia suppressed a grin. This was still a stranger, she reminded herself, and they were at war. You couldn't trust every would-be hero with a charming smile. *Just look at Han*, she thought. Hero one moment, scoundrel the next.

The galaxy could be a confusing place.

"If you're well enough to flirt, you're well enough to answer some questions," she said sternly. "Want to tell me what you were doing out there, fighting someone else's battle?"

"Is that your way of saying thank you?" the pilot asked. "Because if so, you and your blast-happy friend have some work to do on the etiquette front."

Leia sighed. "*Thank you*. Now...what were you doing out there?"

"What were *you* doing out there?" he countered. "Who are you people, anyway?"

"I asked first," Leia said, biting down hard on the corners of her lips to trap another grin.

## Alex Wheeler

"Indeed you did." The pilot looked thoughtful for a moment. "Truth?"

"That would be nice."

He raised a hand, wincing at the effort. She shook, being careful not to squeeze too hard. "Tobin Elad," he told her. "Dissident, guerilla warrior, exile, orphan, and rather atrocious poet. Though not in that order."

"Leia," she said, keeping her surname to herself.

"Professional damsel in distress?" he suggested, when it was clear she wouldn't be offering any additional information.

"I prefer to rescue *myself*, thank you very much."

"I'll keep that in mind for the future," he said lightly. "Wouldn't want to overstep."

"You call yourself a warrior," Leia said. "That means you have an enemy."

He grew serious at once. "We all have an enemy. The Empire." Again, he tried to push himself into a sitting position. This time, despite the pain, he made it upright. "Though I suppose some of us have more reason to fight than others."

Leia suspected that the pain written across his face had nothing to do with his wounded shoulder. "And your reason?" she asked softly.

"Reasons," he admitted. "Three of them. Or hundreds of thousands. Depending on how you count." He fell silent.

Leia waited, letting him go forward at his own pace.

He kept his eyes fixed over her shoulder, gazing intently at the wall of instrument panels behind her head. She took in the faded bruises on his arms and torso, the network of scars criss-crossing his weathered face. He was a few years younger than Han, but the darkness in his eyes made him appear much, much older.

"At first, I wanted only peace," he said, his voice barely audible. "Peaceful coexistence with the Empire. Preservation of our way of life. Have you ever been to Malano III?"

Leia shook her head. She knew it was a world just beyond the galactic core, but she had never been.

"It's a beautiful place," he said. "Trees everywhere. Even our cities were idylls of green, laced through with crystalline blue rivers. And we are a peaceful people." He frowned. "*Were*. We *were* peaceful. But that wasn't enough for the Empire. No, it wasn't enough that we obey quietly. They wanted our cities, they wanted our *land*. They wanted to turn our quiet planet into a home for their armies and their weapons installations. Cover the land with barracks and factories. Turn its citizens into workers. 'Work,' that was their term." His face twisted. "I called it what it was. Slavery."

"The Empire must have appreciated that," Leia said wryly.

"Not so much," he agreed. "Those of us who objected were soon driven out. We who had been peaceful objectors became saboteurs, sneaking into the city in the dead of night, setting explosives, struggling to regain control." He shook his head. "We were fools. I see that now. Insane to think the Empire could be deterred."

"It's never foolish to fight for what's right," Leia said fiercely.

"It's foolish to deny what you know to be the truth. And the truth is, we were few, we were weak. The Empire was strong. If they'd only punished us..." His throat choked off the words. Then he cleared his throat. When he spoke again, his tone was nearly expressionless. "Mirabel, that was our capital. They used thermal detonators to create a firestorm that consumed the whole city. Thousands upon thousands died. Everyone I'd ever cared about. Everyone I'd ever known. My wife..." He hung his head, and continued in a whisper. "My child."

"I'm sorry." They were such small, pathetic words. Nothing, in the face of what he'd lost.

And Leia understood loss.

"It was a long time ago," Elad said, his voice stony. Leia recognized that tone, that hardness. You had to block out the storm of emotions—forget the past—if you were going to go on.

## Alex Wheeler

"I'm on my own now, hitting back at the Empire where and when I can. That's what I was doing when we crossed paths—I figured if I could get my hands on a TIE fighter, I could fly right into the heart of the Empire, really do some damage before they caught on."

"A single ship against the Imperial Fleet?" Leia asked in horror. "But that's—"

Certain death.

He nodded. "I guess I owe you and your crew an apology. I'd been planning to force that Imperial into a crash landing on the moon—but I guess I chased him right into your path."

"So saving us ruined your plan?"

"Revenge can wait a little longer," Elad said. "To be honest, it's the only thing left keeping me going. When you've lost as much as I have..." He shook his head. "You wouldn't understand. I hope you'll never have to."

Leia rested a hand lightly on his. "I understand."

She needed only to say the word, and he would see.

*Alderaan.*

It filled her mind, every day, every minute. Their faces, their voices. The lush, green parks, filled with children on a summer's day. The sweet scent of t'iiil, blossoming over a meadow. Her father's embrace.

Gone.

They lived inside of her, but she trapped them within. The pain was too fresh, too raw. It was too hard.

And yet suddenly, it seemed all too easy to let it out.

"Sometimes I fear the fight is all that keeps me going," she told him. "I draw breath, I eat, I move forward, only because I know the fight must continue. Maybe that's why I fight so hard. Because if I didn't have that—" Leia stopped. She'd never admitted that to anyone before. Maybe not even to herself.

And this was a *stranger*. What was she doing?

"If you didn't have that, you fear there'd be nothing left?" It didn't sound like a question.

## STAR WARS: Target

Leia stood up abruptly. "I should let the others know you're awake," she said brusquely. "They've been concerned."

"I'm not going anywhere," Elad pointed out. "They can wait."

She was tempted to stay, to talk—and that decided her. "Someone will be back to check on you soon," she told him, backing out of the small room. She needed to get away from this man—to stay away from him. He tempted her to trust too much, too easily, and that way led only to danger. "Lie back. Rest."

He followed orders, poorly disguising a sigh of relief as his head hit the pillow. "Thank you, Leia. For sitting with me. It seems I haven't had anyone to talk to—really *talk* to—in a long time. It felt surprisingly good."

"Sometimes you just need someone to listen to you," Leia said, shifting uncomfortably under the weight of his stare.

"Yes," he said, gazing so intently that she feared he could see right into her head. "Sometimes you do."

The severity of his injury had been unexpected, but it had worked to his advantage.

X-7 made everything work to his advantage; it was the only way he'd stayed alive for as long as he had.

The princess had bought the act completely, he could tell from the glassy sheen that fell across her eyes when he unspooled the lies about a dead wife and child. Soon she would open up to him, tell him whatever he needed to know.

X-7 regained his strength quickly, but feigned weakness over the course of the next two days. Hobbling around the ship gave him a chance to observe the crew. And certainly no one would expect the brave, wounded hero to pose a threat.

They'd put the weapons systems back online, and were now in a stable orbit around Muunilinst. X-7 suspected they were waiting to decide what to do with him before they made their next move. His next job was to convince them he could be

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trusted with the content of their Rebel mission—the first of many Rebel secrets he would possess.

He bided his time; he watched. Humans were sad creatures, he thought, so unaware of their own selves, their own weaknesses. Leia and the captain, Han, for example. They argued ceaselessly, oblivious of the energy that lay beneath the surface of their every encounter. Neither understood the unspoken bond they shared. But X-7 saw it, and this was knowledge he could exploit.

And the boy...now, there was an interesting case. When Luke had faced the reek with his lightsaber, X-7 had nearly given himself away with a gasp of surprise. He'd heard of the Jedi, of course, but everyone knew they were long extinct.

Yet somehow the boy possessed the weapon of a Jedi, even fancied *himself* a Jedi, despite the fact that he could barely strike a blow without falling on his face. There was strength there, X-7 knew, but it was well hidden, buried so deep that Luke might never find it.

The boy was too innocent, too trusting, and this, too, was something that X-7 could use. While X-7 suspected Han Solo might be persuaded to sell his information for the right price, Luke might offer it up for free.

Either could easily prove to be the weak link he needed.

Yes, someone on this ship would lead him straight to the being who had destroyed the Death Star. It was only a matter of time.

## Chapter Eleven

**W**e have to decide *now*,” Leia said. “We’ve waited long enough.”

Luke sank into the copilot’s chair, flinching at Chewbacca’s growled warning. “I’m not trying to take your place,” he assured the Wookiee. “I just need to sit down.” He’d been doing calisthenics for the last couple hours. He wasn’t sure if driving himself to the point of exhaustion was part of being a Jedi Knight.

But if so, he was on the right track.

“I’m don’t know what the problem is,” Luke said. “Elad’s regained his strength, and he’d be a real asset to the mission. I say we put down on Muunilinst tonight.”

“And *I* say, we know very little about him,” Leia pointed out. “We have no cause to trust him, much less involve him in Rebel business. Even if he wanted to be involved.”

Elad was asleep on the other side of the ship, and they’d decided to take advantage of the moment to discuss how to proceed. Luke was tired of wasting time in orbit around Muunilinst. The Rebellion needed them to *act*, not sit around and endlessly debate.

“He obviously has no love for the Empire,” Luke said. “He blasted that TIE right out of the sky.” He looked curiously at

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Leia. “Maybe if you weren’t always avoiding him, you’d see that he’s on our side.”

“I’m not *avoiding* him,” she said hotly. “I just don’t know that he can be trusted. After all, he is a civilian.”

Han nodded—then scowled. “Hey, *I’m* a civilian!” he protested.

Leia favored him with a cool stare. “My point exactly.”

“He doesn’t have a ship,” Luke pointed out. “We can’t just dump him into space.”

“We’ve been over this,” Leia said. “We can drop him on Deestrillion—it’s not too far out of our way.”

“Or we could bring him with us,” Luke said. “If we run into trouble, we might be glad we did.”

“Or we might be betrayed at the worst possible moment,” Leia argued. “You heard General Dodonna, Luke. The Empire is searching for us—for *you*. This isn’t the time to take chances.”

*She’s always trying to protect me*, Luke thought, frustrated. Why did no one seem to understand that he could protect himself? “Maybe this isn’t the time to play it safe.”

R2-D2 beeped and whistled.

“Yes, yes, Artoo, I’ll tell them,” C-3PO said irritably. “Princess Leia, Artoo says that he’s run a remote search of the Malano III computer system and has confirmed Tobin Elad’s identity.”

The R2 droid beeped again.

“Artoo says—” C-3PO turned to him in horror. “Did you say *criminal*?” the droid asked in a panicky voice. “Artoo reports that Tobin Elad is a *wanted criminal*—the Empire has a price on his head!” His golden arms fluttered in terror. “Princess Leia, I must agree with you on this issue. The man is clearly a danger to us all. Just imagine, Artoo—trapped in space with a criminal!”

“Threepio, according to the Empire, we’re *all* criminals,” Luke pointed out wearily. “Even you.”



"Me?" C-3PO asked in indignation. "I beg to differ, Master Luke. Need I remind you, I am familiar with the law of the land, and never has a droid had deeper respect for—"

"Enough!" Han exploded. "We get it. The only thing we're in danger of around you is boring ourselves to death."

"Forgive him, Threepio," Leia said, glaring at Han. "The only language he speaks is *brute*." She turned to Luke, softening her tone. "Luke, I've heard that the Jedi were able to sense whether someone could be trusted or not. I know you're not trained...but can you give us anything to go on? Some kind of Jedi feeling?"

Han snorted. "You want to base a decision like this on some kooky mystical *feeling*?" he asked incredulously. "For all you know, 'Jedi feelings' were just indigestion."

"They were *not*," Luke said hotly, fully aware that he knew almost as little about the Jedi as Han. "The Jedi could see a being's true self."

At least, that's how Ben had made it sound. Luke tightened his jaw. It didn't matter what the Jedi could do...Han was right. *He* couldn't do anything. And without Ben around to train him, that would never change.

"Luke has a connection to the Force," Leia said fiercely. "We've all seen it." She rested a hand on top of his. "Just think about it for a moment. Do you sense *anything*?"

Luke closed his eyes. He breathed in deeply, then let the air out slowly. He tried to connect to the galaxy. *The Force is all around me*, he reminded himself. *I just have to reach for it and it will be there.*

But he felt nothing.

When he opened his eyes, Han and Leia were staring at him—Leia's eyes filled with hope, Han's with barely concealed mockery. Luke couldn't stand to be laughed at yet again.

"I think we can trust him," he said finally. "We should take him to Muunilinst with us." Maybe his opinion wasn't informed by the Force. But so what? Ben had told him to trust his instincts. For the moment, instincts would have to be enough.

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Leia looked thoughtful. "I suppose Elad did sacrifice himself to help us..."

"Give me a break, princess," Han said in disgust. "You're *buying* this Jedi mumbo jumbo?"

"I'm just saying that maybe I was too hasty to distrust the man."

"Sure, now that—"

"Excuse me," Luke said, standing up. He knew their argument could continue indefinitely—and he suddenly felt the very strong need to be alone. He was grateful for his friends, but they couldn't understand what it was like, knowing a great power inside of him might remain hidden forever.

"Come on, Ben, where are you!" Luke exclaimed in frustration. He was sitting on the edge of his bunk, his eyes closed, intently trying to connect with Obi-Wan's spirit. The Jedi had spoken to him when he truly needed it. Surely it could happen again.

*Unless that was just my imagination.* Much as he tried to suppress the thought, it kept popping up.

Because if Obi-Wan Kenobi really had the power to speak from beyond the grave, why was he staying silent?

*Maybe he decided I wasn't worthy of being a Jedi after all.*

"Am I disturbing you?" Tobin Elad said from the doorway.

Luke opened his eyes. "No. I was just...doing nothing."

Elad stepped into the cramped cabin and looked around. "Are you alone in here? I thought I heard you talking to someone."

Luke flushed and shook his head. "No. I'm on my own. Come on in." He hadn't had much of a chance to talk to Elad one-on-one. This would be a good opportunity to investigate the man's motives. The Force might not be able to tell Luke whether to trust him, but that didn't mean Luke couldn't figure it out for himself.

Elad perched on a narrow counter and fixed Luke with a steady gaze. "So, have you all made your decision yet?"

“Our decision?”

“Whether to trust me.” Elad smiled. “That’s why we’re flying around in circles, right?”

“Oh. I, uh...” Luke hesitated, unsure what to say.

Elad laughed softly. “It’s okay—I wouldn’t trust me either, if I were you. Trusting too quickly is a good way to get dead.”

“So I’ve heard.” Luke wondered if Han realized how much he and Elad had in common.

“So why aren’t you up in the cockpit with the others, trying to decide my fate?”

Luke shrugged. “I had some things I needed to do.”

“Lightsaber practice?” Elad asked.

Automatically, Luke’s hand moved to the lightsaber hanging from his belt. It was strange how after such a short time, it had already come to feel a part of him.

“I’ve never met a Jedi before,” Elad said. “It’s quite an honor.”

“I’m not a Jedi,” Luke admitted. “Not yet.” *Maybe not ever.*

“Well, you have the right weapon,” Elad said. “That’s a start.”

“A lightsaber’s not a weapon,” Luke said, echoing what Ben had told him. “It’s a tool, to focus the Force. That’s what it *really* means to be a Jedi. You have to connect to the Force.”

“And you don’t?”

Luke ducked his head. “Not yet. Sometimes I’m afraid I never will.” He’d never admitted this to Han or Leia, but somehow, it was easier to speak his concerns out loud to a stranger. “Ben—my teacher—I guess he saw something in me. He was so confident I would learn. But now he’s gone. And sometimes I wonder...what if he was wrong?”

“You’ve never felt the Force?” Elad asked.

“Once,” Luke admitted. “When it really counted. Everything rested on my shoulders, and I should have been terrified, but instead, I was just *certain* that I could do it. I knew it was our only chance and when I—” He cut himself off abruptly. What was he

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doing, talking about the Death Star with an outsider? He knew better—and this conversation was supposed to be about *Elad*. How had he ended up revealing so much about himself?

Elad looked at him curiously. “When you...” he prompted.

Luke shook his head. “It just felt good to save the day,” he admitted. “I know I could be of much more use to the Rebellion if I could access my Jedi skills, but without Ben...”

Elad raised his eyebrows. “I don’t know who this Ben was, but it seems to me that you don’t need him to tell you how to become a Jedi. Not if he was right, and you’ve really got it inside of you.”

“But how am I supposed to figure it out on my own?” Luke asked, feeling helpless.

“Kid, we’ve all got to figure it out on our own.”

Luke hated it when Han called him “kid,” but this was different. When Elad said it, he somehow managed to sound like he was treating Luke as an equal.

“Every person on this ship is alone in the galaxy,” Elad continued. “The Empire has seen to that.”

“We’re not alone if we have each other,” Luke argued.

“I don’t know about you,” Elad said, “but sometimes I feel most alone around other people.” He paused, looking like he was trying to decide whether to say more. “It’s hard, having no anchor to the past, no one guiding you to the future. I know. You’ve just got to accept it. Stop waiting for this Ben to tell you what you want to do—find a way to decide for yourself. Something tells me you will.”

The confidence in his voice spilled over into Luke. For the first time in a long time, he began to hope that he might find his way to the Jedi path all on his own. He looked up at Elad in gratitude, realizing that even without the help of the Force, his instincts had been correct.

This man was on his side.

## Chapter Twelve

The gray, hulking Golan III defense platform seemed to cast a shadow across space as the *Millennium Falcon* sailed slowly past.

"You *sure* these landing codes will get us through?" Han asked again, casting a glance at the turbolasers protruding from the orbiting defense station. "Because if they don't, this mission of yours is over before it starts. Along with our lives."

"They'll work," Leia said. "General Dodonna assured me."

Luke admired her certainty. Her faith in the Rebel Alliance never flagged. It was as rock solid as her loyalty and her determination. He wondered if she'd ever experienced a true moment of doubt.

As they neared the atmosphere, the Imperial official manning the spaceport called in with a request for their authorization. Leia read off the landing code she'd been given.

There was a pause.

"One moment, please," the Imperial said tone-lessly.

Luke and Han exchanged a nervous glance. "Now's when they start shooting," Han predicted.

"Permission to land granted," the official informed them.

Han broke into a wide grin. "See? What'd I tell you—piece of cake."

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Luke gaped wide-eyed at the towering marble columns looming over the crowded streets of Pilaan, one of Muunilinst's largest cities. Rising hundreds of stories above his head, they disappeared into a swirling mist of gray clouds.

"They don't call it Moneyland for nothing," Han said, his eyes drinking in the precious gems encrusted in several of the buildings' edifices.

"That's *Moneylend*," Leia corrected him. "Nearly every wealthy being in the galaxy owes some portion of his fortune to the Muuns. It's the only reason the Empire tolerates them."

It was well-known that the Emperor considered nonhuman beings to be second-class citizens, unworthy of the privileges of Galactic power. But he made an exception for the Muuns. Although the Muun-controlled InterGalactic Banking Clan had long since been dissolved, Muunilinst retained its power as the financial center of the universe, and the Muuns remained in control.

With a heavy Imperial presence to ensure they didn't misbehave. Luke fixed his eyes on the sidewalk as they passed by a line of stormtroopers standing guard over one of the elaborate marble temples.

"Just act like you belong, kid," Han advised him. "No one will look twice."

Luke had worried they would make a strange group: four humans, two droids, and a Wookiee. But the crowded streets were filled with beings of all kinds, and no one seemed curious about any of the others. The Muuns themselves were especially unconcerned. Tall and slender, with ashy gray skin, they stood stiffly erect, their faces expressionless. It was as if they were made of marble as well.

Luke could overhear them murmuring to each other as they passed, a confusing language of short, repetitive sounds. It sounded like a world of R2 droids.

He knew he was drawing attention to himself, gaping at everything they passed, but he couldn't help it. He'd been on so

few planets in his life, and all of them had housed more animals than people. Yavin 4 was nearly uninhabited, and despite its small cities, Tatooine's empty stretches of sand often seemed to stretch on forever.

This city, its streets pulsing with noise and color, its millions of inhabitants shuffling up and down the pavements, landspeeders jamming the streets, airspeeders streaking overhead—it was unlike anything he'd ever seen.

After all, not long ago, he'd been an isolated farm boy in the middle of nowhere, staring up at the stars and wondering if he would ever reach them. Now he was on the other side of the galaxy, on a secret mission in the heart of Imperial space.

Life had become infinitely more dangerous, but at the same time, infinitely more interesting. He couldn't imagine going back.

*Except back then, Uncle Lars and Aunt Beru were still alive, he thought. Shouldn't I want to go back to that old life with them? Even if it's not possible, shouldn't I wish that it were?*

Before he could let himself answer the question, they'd arrived at the rendezvous point.

"Mak Luunim lives on the twenty-third floor," Leia said, leading them to a turbolift just inside the grand white building. Even Han paused to appreciate the golden fountain glimmering at the center of the marble-encrusted lobby. But Leia was completely unfazed by the luxury.

Tobin Elad followed close behind her, seeming just as unconcerned by the surroundings.

If possible, the twenty-third floor was even more opulent than the lobby they'd left behind. The turbolift opened into a small entry area, filled with marble statues, all of the same Muun.

"My master." A sallow-faced Muun appeared behind them, seemingly from nowhere. He was dressed in a simple robe of gray and brown, his gaze fixed on the sculptures. "The great Mak Luunim. He commissioned work from Muunilinst's finest artisans, and naturally, they were all inspired to turn their talents to his noble form."

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“*Naturally*,” Han muttered. “I’m sure their commission had nothing to do with it.”

Leia shot him a look, its meaning clear: *Behave*.

“We have an appointment with your master,” Leia told him. “He should be expecting us.”

The Muun hung his head and passed his fingers along the wall. A hidden entryway opened in the marble. “You are to come inside.”

They stepped into a wide parlor, squinting in the reflected glare. Dancing points of light shimmered from crystalline chandeliers, bouncing off golden walls and floor. Mak Luunim’s apartment had nothing of the elegant beauty of the streets of Pilaan. Golden statuettes and framed, gilded paintings crowded nearly every inch of surface space. Even the furniture contained more gold than fabric.

Artistic representations of Mak Luunim’s face gazed back at them from every wall.

“Should we wait here for your master?” Leia asked.

Luke hoped the Muun would arrive soon. He was beginning to feel deeply uncomfortable. What kind of being would choose to live like this?

“I have no master,” the Muun said mournfully.

“But you said Luunim was your master,” Luke pointed out, confused. Something felt off, and he was beginning to realize it wasn’t just the furniture.

“Indeed,” the Muun said. “Was my master. Is no more. The noble Mak Luunim has left us.”

“Left us to go to the store?” Han asked hopefully. “Because we can wait.”

“Left our mortal realm.” The Muun’s long face seemed to grow even longer as his mouth stretched in a sigh of sorrow.

Luke’s hand crept toward his lightsaber.

Han frowned. “Princess, maybe we should—”

“How did he die?” Leia asked. “And when?”



## **STAR WARS: Target**

“We’ll ask the questions here,” a voice said from behind them. Luke whirled around. The door they’d entered through was gone, turned back into solid marble. And standing in front of it, blasters drawn, was a line of six Imperial stormtroopers.

## Chapter Thirteen

What business do you have with Mak Luunim?" one of the stormtroopers asked through his voice intercom.

"Who?" Han asked innocently. "Must have the wrong apartment. Now, I'm not saying all Muuns look alike, but just between you and me—"

"*State your business,*" the stormtrooper repeated, raising his blaster. Han did some quick calculations. They were surrounded, outgunned, outnumbered.

His kind of odds.

"Looks like we're done with the sweet talk portion of the evening," Han muttered under his breath. He exchanged a look with Tobin Elad, who nodded and inched toward the closest guard. *Good*, Han thought. The man knew how to read a room.

"Come quietly for detainment," the stormtrooper informed them. "Otherwise we'll shoot you right here."

"Death now or death later?" Han mused, readying his blaster. "What's behind door number three?" He pretended to think for a moment. "Oh, that's right," he added. "*Fire.*"

Elad aimed a lightning-fast kick at the nearest stormtrooper, who went down in a clatter of armor. The others guards turned in his direction, distracted just for a moment. Long enough. Han

## STAR WARS: Target

unleashed a burst of blaster fire at the troopers, then dived behind a couch before they could retaliate.

Luke and Leia fled to opposite corners, whipping out their blasters as they ran. Their fire provided enough cover for Han to take his time, aiming for the cracks in the stormtrooper armor. One by one, the Imperials went down.

The opulent apartment quickly turned into a war zone. Blaster fire tore through satin upholstery; statues of Mak Luunim blew up in a hail of marble dust. Chewbacca snarled as one of the stormtroopers tried to knock him out with a blaster to the head. He hoisted the soldier over his head and flung him through a wall separating the parlor from the dining area.

"No, no, no!" Luunim's servile employee sniveled, distraught. He ignored the blaster fire and scurried back and forth across the apartment, steadying wobbling golden vases and tossing himself across priceless heirlooms. "The master wouldn't like this at all!"

*The master probably doesn't like being dead much, either,* Han thought, shoving the Muun out of the way just before a burst of blaster fire could slam into him. *Sometimes you don't have a choice.*

"And *stay* down," Han advised the Muun, who had curled up beneath a coffee table, clutching a shimmering silver figurine to his chest. The creature had clearly set them up for an ambush, but that didn't mean he deserved to die.

Elad suddenly swiveled around, aiming his blaster directly at Han's head. "Hey—" Han shouted—just as the blaster fire seared past his face. There was a cry of pain from behind him as a stormtrooper took the hit.

"You're welcome," Elad smirked.

"Next time you could just say 'behind you,' " Han grumbled. But he was grateful for the save. He had to admit, Elad was just as good with a blaster as he was with a ship. He fought like a machine, cool and efficient.

Deadly.

Speaking of machines...

## Alex Wheeler

“What are you doing?” he shouted at R2-D2, almost tripping over the droid. “Figure out a way to get that door open again!”

R2-D2 beeped indignantly, but he rolled toward the door, injecting a manipulator arm into the instrument panel.

Smoke clouded the air, heavy with the acrid stench of blaster fire. Half the stormtroopers were down, but three more crouched behind a toppled chair and table. Every few seconds, they popped up from behind their makeshift barricade and unleashed another volley of fire. Han and Elad were pinned behind a thick marble column. There was too much cover in the room, and too little space—it was impossible for Han to get a clear shot without exposing himself.

The fight was a draw...at least until the stormtroopers called in reinforcements.

Which could happen any minute.

“How we coming with those doors?” Han asked urgently. How long could it take to pry open some millionaire’s front door?

Then again—Han took a look around the ruined apartment, realizing there was probably more wealth between these four walls than he’d smuggled in his lifetime. It was understandable that Luunim would have wanted a state of the art system to keep people out.

Or keep people in.

R2-D2 trilled triumphantly as the doors slid open.

“Go!” Elad shouted, a second before Han was about to do the same. “I’ll cover you.”

The droids rushed out first, followed by Leia, Luke, and Chewbacca.

“Go!” Elad shouted again, pinning down the stormtroopers with another round of fire.

“You go!” Han insisted. “I’ll cover *you*.”

“You want to fight about this, or you want to live?”

“You have to ask?” Han grinned.

“On three?”

## STAR WARS: Target

Han nodded, counting silently.

*One...two...three*, he mouthed, and they both took off for the door, twisting backward as they ran, firing at the stormtroopers who followed. As blaster fire punched holes in the marble wall, they slipped out of the apartment, just as the doors shut behind them.

“Can you stop them from coming through?” Han asked the astromech droid.

R2-D2 whistled a response.

C-3PO looked at him in surprise. “He says he’s already done so, Captain Solo. He jammed the command circuitry. Who told you to do that, Artoo?”

R2-D2 beeped and whistled, sounding proud.

“What do you mean, you came up with it on your own?” C-3PO asked, horrified. “Need I remind you of our place, Artoo? We’re to carry out orders, not concoct crazy schemes sure to—”

“Nice work, Artoo,” Luke cut in, smiling. “You saved us all.”

“Well...yes, now that you mention it,” C-3PO blustered, “I suppose we did.”

## Chapter Fourteen

They slipped safely out of the building, quickly absorbed by the dense crowds. Leia led them up and down packed streets, wandering aimlessly in hopes of losing any Imperials that might be on their trail. But as nearly an hour passed without incident, they decided that they were safe.

For now.

They eventually found themselves on the fringes of the city. There were no more gleaming marble edifices here, only squat stone buildings the color of mud. Orange dragon beasts, nearly as large as a human foot, scampered through the streets, nibbling at the piles of garbage that lay piled on every corner. It was obvious that none of the wealthier Muuns, with their rich satin robes and fat bank accounts, ever strayed toward this part of town.

“We need to figure out why the Imperials killed Mak Luunim,” Leia said, stumbling over a narrow ditch. Luke reached out to steady her, but Elad was faster. He caught her arm just before she fell. She shook him off. “If they discovered his connections to the Alliance, we could be in danger.”

“Princess, those stormtroopers back there nearly turned us into burnt mealbread toast,” Han pointed out. “I’d say we’re already in danger.”

"We need to ask around, find out whatever we can about Luunim," Luke suggested.

Han shook his head. "We *need* to lay low."

"Might I suggest a way of doing both?" Tobin Elad paused in front of a dingy cantina, its blinking sign hanging precariously over the door. So much mud spotted the windows that the transparisteel had turned a uniform brown.

"Ah, my kind of place." Han nodded appreciatively.

"*This*?" Leia wrinkled her nose and jerked out of the way as a grunting Gamorrean pushed through the doorway, his stench trailing behind him like a shadow. "It's a total dump!"

Han broke into a wide grin. "Exactly."

The inside of the cantina was even dingier than the outside. It took several minutes for their eyes to adjust to the darkness. Leia almost would have preferred it if they hadn't. Then she wouldn't have had to watch the Gungan on the next stool brushing his companion's hair with a long, pink tongue. Or the unusually scruffy Muun behind the bar serve her a glass of water that he'd just used to wash his feet.

But in addition to clean feet, the Muun had a big mouth, and that was serving them well.

"That gundark-face Luunim owed me money," Han lied, leaning toward the bartender like they were old friends. "Should've known he'd rather die than pay me back."

"Luunim owed everyone money," the bartender said. His voice was nearly a hiss. "It was bound to get him into trouble one day." The bartender had confided that Mak Luunim died when his airspeeder's central turbine failed in midair. An Imperial inquest had deemed the incident an accident. The bartender sneered at anyone gullible enough to believe it.

"Thing is, who's going to pay me now?" Han complained. "Imperials are crawling all over the place, and I get the sense they're not too interested in paying his debts."

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“Imperials!” The bartender spit into his glass. Leia resolved to keep an eye on it, lest he try to serve it to her next. “Only honorable beings repay their debts. The Imperials merely take and take—and then move on.” He snickered. “Lucky thing for Nal Kenuun that he always takes first.”

Han tensed, and Leia could tell he was trying his best to sound casual. “So this Nal Kenuun guy got at Luunim’s place before the Imperials showed up?” Han asked. “Did Luunim owe him, too?”

“Everyone owes Nal Kenuun,” the bartender said. “I have no doubt he collected on his debt, whether or not Luunim was alive to pay him.”

Han glanced at Leia, and she knew exactly what he was thinking. If this Nal Kenuun had plundered Luunim’s apartment, looking for items of value, then it was possible he had possession of the Rebellion’s datacard—or at least might know where to find it.

Certainly it was the best lead they had, since they couldn’t very well go back to Luunim’s apartment and look for themselves. Not with the Empire swarming all over it.

“Don’t suppose you know where I could find this Kenuun,” Han said.

The bartender stiffened. “I wouldn’t know anything about that.” He scooped their glasses off the counter and retreated into a back room. “I got dishes to wash. Leave your payment on the counter when you go.”

“That Muun never washed a dish in his life,” Leia said, glancing at the spotted glasses littering the bar.

“He was definitely spooked when we started talking about Kenuun,” Han agreed. “Must mean we’re on the right track.”

It could, in fact, have meant anything, but Leia decided not to mention that. She wanted to believe that Han was right. Because they needed that datacard—the *Rebellion* needed that datacard. And this was their only lead.



Unfortunately, the bartender wasn't the only one who refused to help. They split up, wandering into different areas of the cantina, casually dropping Nal Kenuun's name into conversations. Each conversation ended abruptly.

When they met up again outside the front door, they were no closer to Kenuun than when they'd started.

"He's rich, he's powerful, and he likes to gamble," Luke reported. "And no one wants to cross him. That's all I found out."

"Looks like that's all any of us found out," Leia said, defeated. She supposed they could return to the city center and track him down through the central directory, but with the Imperials on their tail, that seemed too great a risk.

A loud hiss slipped out of the alley behind the bar.

They fell silent, turning as one toward the source of the noise. A scaly Dug emerged from the shadows. "Yeah, you," he whispered, curling a finger toward them. "C'mere."

Chewbacca growled softly.

"I know," Han muttered. "I saw him too. Sitting alone. Watching us."

"Limited time offer," the Dug warned, retreating further into the alley.

C-3PO raised a finger in protest. "I must say, I find it highly inadvisable to follow this being into—wait, where are you all going?"

Leia led the way.

The Dug was shorter than most of his kind, barely a meter high. His scaly flesh hung thick and loose around his neck. He wore a scooped metal blade in a holster slung across his shoulders.

"Hear you're looking for Nal Kenuun," he said in a low, gravelly voice.

"It's possible." Han kept a hand on his blaster.

"Whadya want with him?" The Dug squinted with suspicion.

## Alex Wheeler

“Looking for some action,” Han said. “Hear he’s the place to get it. I’ve got some credits to burn.”

“You think you’re some kind of gambler?” the Dug asked.

“The best kind,” Han retorted. “The winning kind.”

“No one wins against Nal Kenuun.”

Han shrugged. “Only one way to find out.”

“Kenuun runs a high stakes game,” the Dug warned him. “The buy-in’s at ten thousand. No IOUs. You don’t look like you have that kind of cash on you.”

“Looks can be deceiving,” Han said. “I have what I need.”

Leia shot him a sharp glance. Between them, they barely had ten credits, much less ten thousand—not to mention that posing as a high-stakes gambler didn’t seem to qualify as lying low.

“And what’s in it for me?” the Dug asked.

“The deep pleasure of helping out a friend?” Han suggested.

The Dug snorted.

“Okay then, a hundred credits,” Han said. “But only when we reach Kenuun.”

Leia expected the Dug to ask for payment up front—but surprisingly, he agreed.

“Call me Grunta,” he said, drawing back his thick, weathered lips into a puckered smile. “It’d be my pleasure to take you where you need to go. *Friend*.” The Dug jerked his wrinkled head at the others, his ear fins twitching. “What about them?”

Han leaned in close and lowered his voice. “You know how it is when you start racking up the credits. Plenty of hangers-on wanting a piece of the action. Follow me around everywhere, do whatever I say. They’re harmless.”

Leia fumed, but kept her mouth shut. The Dug set off down the alley on his long, spidery forelimbs, without waiting for them to follow.

“What makes you think we can trust him?” Leia murmured to Han, as they hurried after him.

“Relax, princess,” Han said. “You’re in my world now.”

Leia sighed. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

## Chapter Fifteen

The galaxy was filled with so many strange beings, Luke marveled, as they followed Grunta through a network of grungy, narrow alleys. He tried to imagine what it might be like to be a Dug, eating with his feet and walking on his hands, but it was no use. Not a surprise, Luke thought. He could barely imagine what it was like to be someone like Han, much less an alien from the other side of the galaxy.

“Seems we’re going from the middle of nowhere to the edge of nowhere,” Elad said lightly, falling into step with him. He didn’t sound worried, just mildly curious. Han and Leia were following closely behind the Dug, with Chewbacca and the droids bringing up the rear. Luke felt an odd jolt of pleasure that Elad had chosen to speak with him. The pilot sometimes seemed so oddly removed—he smiled and laughed at all the right moments, but there was always something about him that seemed absent, as if a part of him was missing.

*Maybe it is*, Luke thought, remembering what Leia had told him about Elad’s past. It must be hard for him to connect to people, after all he’d lost.

“So, Luke, how’d you end up with this motley crew in the first place?” Elad asked.

It seemed an odd question to ask out of the blue. “Why?”

## Alex Wheeler

“Just wondering.” Elad shrugged. “You said you were from Tatooine, right? That’s kind of a backwater—no offense.”

Luke shook his head. “Trust me, I know. It’s the *definition* of nowhere.”

“And you’re young, untrained...yet Leia puts so much faith in you.”

“She does?” Luke asked, hoping he didn’t sound as eager as he felt. He was surprised by Elad’s words. Often he wondered if Leia had any faith in him at all. After all, it had been a long time since he’d done anything to deserve it.

“Sure. You can tell by the way she looks to you for advice, the way she listens. She trusts you. You’ve known her for a long time?”

“Not really,” Luke said. “I only joined the Rebellion recently.”

“But before the destruction of the Death Star, right?” Elad asked.

Luke stiffened. “You heard about that?”

Elad spit out a laugh. “The whole *galaxy* heard about that. Such a blow for freedom!” He shook his head. “I’ll tell you, if I could meet the being who flew that ship...” He turned to Luke. “Well, you must have met him, right? Tell me, what was it like, coming face-to-face with the hero of the Rebellion?”

*The hero of the Rebellion?* Luke wanted nothing more than to admit the truth. Imagine, a man like Elad, admiring *him*.

But that would be against protocol.

“Never met him,” Luke lied. “The Alliance is pretty big.”

“Of course. I’m sure only people at the princess’s level can keep track of everyone.”

“Uh huh,” Luke said absently, barely listening. He stopped walking. A strange feeling had swept over him.

*The Force!* he realized suddenly. It was warning him of something. Something evil.

*Elad?*

It seemed impossible. But something was definitely wrong. Elad was asking something, but Luke could barely make out the words. The air around him had become a dense, viscous fluid, making it difficult to breathe, impossible to speak or move. Everything was now darkness.

And then, without warning, the feeling of doom vanished. Light returned to the world.

"Hey, you okay, kid?" Han asked. The whole group was staring at him, like he'd had some kind of fit.

"Fine." Luke drew in a few deep, even breaths. He glanced at Elad, whose concern looked just as sincere as everyone else's.

*But was it?*

Luke shook off their questions. "I just got dizzy for a second. Must have been the sun. Or maybe—"

An explosion of blaster fire drowned out his words. Grunta had opened fire on them!

Chewbacca lunged for the Dug, knocking the blaster out of his hands. But a thunder of engines rumbled overhead. Four swoops streaked toward them, all piloted by Dugs, their blasters drawn.

It was an ambush.

*So this is what the Force was warning me about,* Luke thought, furious with himself. *If only I'd understood, rather than wasting time worrying about Elad.* His hand flew automatically to his lightsaber, but then hesitated.

Han was right: What good was a weapon he didn't know how to use?

He pulled out his blaster instead, and returned fire.

It may have been a surprise attack, but this time, they were neither outgunned nor outnumbered. They were, however, at a serious disadvantage. The Dugs swooped in and out of range at will.

Luke and his friends stood in a tight clump, their backs to each other, their blasters aimed at the sky as the Dugs circled overhead.

## Alex Wheeler

“All we want is the money!” Grunta shouted over the roar of the engines. Chewbacca had wrestled him to the ground. He flailed about wildly, trying to wound the Wookiee with his sharp blade. “Give us that and you’re free to go.”

“Maybe we should tell them we don’t have any money,” Luke said quietly.

Han snorted. “Great idea. I’m sure they’ll wish us a happy afternoon and send us on our way.”

“You have a better idea?” Leia retorted. “After all, your plans have been working so beautifully today.”

“I don’t know about better, but—” Han pulled a sack from beneath his coat and waved it in the air. “You want the credits?” he shouted. “Come and get ’em!” The swoop dived toward the ground, a spindly Dug arm reaching out for the empty sack. Han dropped the bag and grabbed the arm instead, yanking hard. “Now, kid!” he yelled, as the Dug toppled off the swoop.

Without thinking, Luke took a flying leap for the swoop. It was farther and faster than he should have been able to jump—but somehow, he made it.

*The Force*, he thought gratefully, gripping the controls and pivoting around so that Han could clamber aboard behind him. He took off after one of the other Dugs, who rocketed upward in a steep vertical climb, then suddenly broke into a corkscrew dive. Luke followed, accelerating as they plummeted downward, zooming in so close that the Dug’s exhaust warmed his face. Han aimed over Luke’s shoulder and launched a blast at the starboard engine. It blazed white hot, then exploded, a shower of fiery durasteel fragments raining down on them. As Luke ducked and weaved to avoid the flying shrapnel, the Dug’s swoop dropped out of the sky. Luke pulled up seconds before crashing into the ground, and spiraled upward toward the next speeder.

“Who’s next?!” Han shouted gleefully.

The three remaining Dugs took one look at what remained of their friend, and decided they’d rather be alive and poor than rich and dead. The swoops took off toward the city center,

disappearing into the skyline. Luke brought his swoop back to the ground. “Nice flying, kid,” Han said. “Couldn’t have done it better myself.” A moment later, Han reconsidered. “Well, I could’ve. But no one else.”

Back at ground level, Leia, Elad, and Chewbacca surrounded the wreckage of the fallen speeder.

“Where’s Grunta?” Luke asked, looking around.

Chewbacca growled, and pointed a hairy finger at the crashed speeder. On closer inspection, Luke spotted a scaly Dug arm poking out from beneath the wreckage.

Elad grinned. “I *said* ‘heads up.’ Guess he didn’t hear me.”

“Now what?” Luke asked, feeling deflated as the rush of battle adrenaline leaked out of him. “We’re right back where we started.”

“Simple,” Han said confidently. “We just have to...” His voice trailed off, as a strange, queasy expression came over his face. “I’ve got a bad feeling about...” He dropped to the ground, unconscious.

“Han!” Leia rushed to his side—but froze just before she reached him. She looked up, a puzzled expression on her face. Then she toppled to the ground.

“Poison darts,” Elad said, tilting his head to look for a sniper in one of the buildings that rose above them. “We should—” Without warning, he dropped. Chewbacca followed a moment later, with a growl and a deafening thud.

*Duck!* The command seemed to come from within, but Luke obeyed it. As he did, a dart whizzed past, skimming his hair as it blew by.

“That was close, Master Luke,” C-3PO said worriedly. “We must seek cover before—”

Luke darted to his left, just as another dart streaked past. Something, his instincts, his senses—*the Force?*—was warning him of the danger a split second before it arrived. But he couldn’t dodge darts indefinitely. He had to find a way to help his friends.

## Alex Wheeler

*They're just unconscious*, he assured himself, looking away from their still bodies and pale faces. *They can't be—*

“You’re a quick one,” a voice said from behind him. Luke whirled around to find himself face-to-face with a white-armored face mask. “Not quick enough.”

The stormtrooper raised a force pike and jabbed him in the chest. Luke’s body shuddered uncontrollably as the electric shock blazed through him. There was an explosion of pain, and his legs collapsed beneath him.

The massive shock paralyzed his nervous system. He lay on his back, unable to move, staring up at the stormtrooper. Helpless.

Luke prepared himself to die.

The force pike struck again.

More pain.

And then, only darkness.



## Chapter Sixteen

Luke opened his eyes. It was pitch-black. Binders around his wrists held his arms above his head. Similar bolts wrapped around his waist and ankles, pinning him against a cool stone wall.

Everything hurt.

He struggled against the restraints, but they held fast. There was no hope of reaching his lightsaber, which, as the world came back into focus, he saw was still attached to his belt. No hope of escape. Luke tried not to panic.

He was a Jedi, he reminded himself. He should be able to *think* his lightsaber into his hand. But he had no idea how to do so.

“Take it easy, kid,” Han’s voice floated out of the darkness. “Your eyes will adjust soon enough.”

Chewbacca yowled from a few feet away. Luke thought he could make out a hulking shadow that might have been the Wookiee.

“Of course he’s all right,” Han said. “I wasn’t worried.”

Chewbacca growled something back.

“Only because it took him so long to wake up!” Han said defensively. “It’s not my fault he has a weak constitution.”

## Alex Wheeler

"Hey!" Luke protested feebly. The lingering effects of the force pike made his muscles feel like jelly. Even if he could escape from the binders, Luke feared he might not be able to stand, much less fight.

"I think we've been here for several hours," Tobin Elad said. "It's unclear what they're waiting for."

"Did the droids escape?" Luke asked. "Maybe they can help us."

"Maybe," Leia said, but she didn't sound particularly hopeful. Luke, his eyes still adjusting to the dark, peered across the room at her shadowy figure, pinned against the wall. He began struggling against the restraints again. Being trapped was bad enough. But imagining Leia dangling helplessly, while he could do nothing to save her? That was intolerable.

"Or maybe they're already scrap metal on some Imperial construction project," Han said. "Probably more pleasant than whatever's in store for us."

A door swung open, letting a shaft of bright light into the room. Luke winced at the sight of his friends chained to the walls. A trickle of dried blood ran down the side of Leia's face.

The stormtrooper's white armor gleamed. "I've been ordered to ask if you're thirsty."

"Sure," Han said. "How's about you unlock these cuffs and you and I can go grab a drink? Get to know each other a little."

The stormtrooper crossed the room, stopping inches from Han's immobilized body. Luke held his breath.

Instead of a blaster, the guard pulled out a transparent container of liquid, holding it to Han's lips. "Drink."

Han did—then spat the water in the stormtrooper's face.

For a moment, the guard didn't react. Then he pressed a button on his wrist console. Han shouted in pain as the binders around his wrists sizzled with electric current. His head dropped to his chest as he slipped into unconsciousness.

"Anyone else want a drink?" the stormtrooper asked, in a conversational tone.

Silence.

He shrugged and turned to leave the room. "Wait!" Luke shouted, a desperate plan taking shape.

The stormtrooper paused, turning to face Luke. "You want to test out your stun cuffs, too?"

Luke closed his eyes, trying to call on the Force. *I need you now, Ben*, he thought, remembering the day that Ben had first revealed himself as a Jedi Master. He'd used the Force to manipulate the minds of his enemies. *The Force can have a strong influence on the weak-minded*, Ben had said.

"You don't want to hold us prisoner anymore." Luke stared intensely at the guard. "You want to let us go."

There was a long pause.

"No I don't," the stormtrooper said. The door shut behind them, and darkness closed in again.

Hours crept by. Maybe days. There was no way to gauge the passing of time. Luke swallowed hard, his throat dry and scratchy. He wondered if the guard would ever return with more water. Or perhaps this was what the Empire had in store for them all along—a long, slow death by dehydration. They would hang here until their stomachs shrank, their bodies dried out, and they grew weaker and weaker, until they prayed for the end.

They didn't speak much. Everyone had retreated into their own thoughts. Perhaps they were formulating escape plans, but Luke doubted it.

Escape seemed hopeless.

Now there was nothing to do but wait.

Luke was asleep when the door opened again. It was the light that woke him. He squinted, unaccustomed to the brightness that filled the room. A Muun, taller and slimmer than the others they'd seen, stood in the doorway, his shimmering green robe stretching to the floor.

## Alex Wheeler

The Muun nodded, and the cuffs around Luke's wrists and ankles suddenly released. He tumbled to the hard floor with a painful thump. One by one, his friends dropped to the ground as well.

"Apologies for my guards," the Muun said in Basic, his nasal voice sounding unaccustomed to the vowels. "They tend to get carried away."

Luke slowly pulled himself into a sitting position. When he tried to stand, his legs nearly gave out beneath him. Finally, he forced himself upright, sagging against the wall for support. Whatever the Muun had in store for them, Luke vowed he would find the strength to fight back.

They'd been stripped of their blasters. But at least he still had his lightsaber. That was something.

"*Your* guards?" Leia asked. She, too, was leaning against the wall. Chewbacca had pulled Han into a standing position and had a furry arm around the pilot. Only Tobin Elad stood firm and upright, apparently unharmed by the ordeal. "Not the Emperor's?"

The Muun gave her a faint smile. "Even the Empire has debts to repay," he said cryptically. "Occasionally I elect to take my remuneration in a non-monetary form. Having Imperial guards in my employ can prove useful from time to time, but occasionally..." He shook his head. "They can be a bit *overenthusiastic*. And when that happens...well, I'm told you already know about Mak Luunim."

Luke exchanged a meaningful glance with Leia. So Luunim hadn't been killed by the Empire after all. Which meant his death likely had nothing to do with his connection to the Rebel Alliance.

"*You* ordered him killed?" Luke said. "Why?"

"Now, now, precision is everything," the Muun chastised him. "Muunilinst is a civilized planet—having someone killed would be a crime. But can I be held accountable for actions my guards take in their own defense?"

## STAR WARS: Target

"We know nothing of Luunim's dealings with you," Leia said, without a single note of fear in her voice. "And we have no interest in avenging his death. We are not your enemies."

"That remains to be seen," the Muun told her. "First you show up at Luunim's dwelling. Then you masquerade as gamblers so as to track me down? You've been rather busy—and, it seems, very intent on involving yourself in my business." He smiled at the look of surprise on their faces. "Oh yes, I'm Nal Kenuun, the one you've been looking for. Now, would anyone like to explain why you continue to bother me?"

"We're bothering *you*?" Han asked incredulously. "Hey, easy solution, just let us walk out of here, we'll never bother you again."

"We came for something that belongs to us." Leia spoke over Han's blustering. "Luunim was holding a datacard of financial access codes. It's ours, and we believe you confiscated it along with the rest of his valuables. We'd like it back, please." She sounded like she was making an official request in the Senatorial chambers, rather than begging something of her captor as she cowered in his dungeon.

Kenuun nodded. "Yes, I have taken possession of Luunim's financial records. It's likely I have what you're looking for. And of course, if it belongs to you, I have no right to hold it. Except..."

"*Except*?" Han repeated. "*Except* is never good."

Chewbacca grumbled in agreement.

"Except that *you* took something of mine. Something of great value."

"We've taken nothing from you," Luke insisted.

"To the contrary, you took one of my most prized possessions," Kenuun argued. "I believe you knew him by the name of Grunta?"

"That was self-defense!" Luke protested. "He ambushed us."

"I'm sure he did," Kenuun said. "Getting into trouble was one of Grunta's few talents. It's the reason I had him shadowed

## Alex Wheeler

by a homing droid—lucky thing, or I might never have found the beings who killed him.”

*So the guards weren't after us*, Luke thought. *They were after the Dug.*

“The Muuns are honorable beings,” Kenuun said. “And I would be happy to return your possession to you—once you replace mine.”

“And just how are we supposed to replace your pet Dug?” Han asked.

“By doing his job for him. Grunta may have had many failings, but he was an *excellent* Podracer. And in the Podrace two days hence, he was about to earn me a rather large sum of money.”

“Podracing is illegal,” Leia said. “Half the racers end up dead.”

“Indeed. Poor Grunta was probably lucky to live as long as he did. And certainly this was a more pleasant way to go.” The Muun crossed his long, slender arms. “Be that as it may, the race goes on. One of *you* will take Grunta’s spot in the race. And you will win. I’ll receive my money, you’ll receive your datacard.”

“How do we know you’ll keep your end of the bargain?” Luke asked.

Kenuun looked offended. “I’m a *Muun*,” he said. “There’s nothing more sacred to my people than keeping our word in financial dealings.”

“It’s true,” Han pointed out. “Muuns’ll take you for everything you’ve got, but they never cheat.”

“It’s irrelevant,” Elad snapped. “No human can win a Podrace. The best of human pilots would be lucky to even *finish* the race without crashing. And since I don’t think the Wookiee is up to the task...”

“One of you will enter the race,” Kenuun said again, unmoved. “You will win. Then and only then, the datacard will be yours.”

“Unless we die trying,” Han added.

## STAR WARS: Target

The Muun nodded at the two stormtroopers who flanked him on either side. They raised their blasters, aiming them toward the prisoners. “There are many ways to die,” he said serenely. “And as you knew Mak Luunim, you know what happens to beings who choose not to repay their debts to me.”

“We’ll do it,” Luke said. “We’ll race, and we’ll win. We accept your bargain.”

Leia shot him an alarmed look. “Have you ever *seen* a Podrace?” she asked. “It’s certain death.”

Luke had seen several Podraces—Tatooine was one of the few places left in the galaxy where the illegal sport still flourished. He knew that no human had the reflexes to compete. No *ordinary* human, at least.

But he also knew that they had no choice.

And that when it came to flying, he was far from ordinary.

“We’ll do it,” he repeated. “*I’ll* do it.”

## Chapter Seventeen

The dead Dug's Podracer was a top of the line Collor Pondrat Plug-2 Behemoth, with a top speed of 790 kilometers per hour. According to Nal Kenuun, it also had a modified traction system and an upgraded throttle. Its bulky engines were streaked with elaborate green and yellow flames, while the cockpit was painted an angry red, with a green "K" stenciled on either side.

Kenuun's guards had taken them to an empty, barren area a hundred kilometers outside of the city. A network of cavernous cliffs loomed to one side, while on the other, there was nothing in sight but flat, weedy ground stretching to the horizon. Tents had been erected to house the other Podracers and their crews. It would be a small, elite race, with only five other racers. They had all arrived and were pretending to studiously polish and tweak their engines. But it was obvious they were all watching the newest entrant to the race.

Luke folded himself into the narrow seat, which had been custom designed for a creature significantly shorter than he was. Leia winced as he banged his knees hard against the steering controls.

"You look like a Wookiee trying to squeeze inside a gartro nest, kid," Han joked.



## STAR WARS: Target

Leia shushed him—but she had to admit it was true. Kenuun had given them a choice of Podracers, but all were equally unsuited for a driver of Luke's size. Podracing just wasn't designed for humans. She didn't know very much about the sport, but Elad had explained that the top racers often sped through a course at more than 900 kilometers per hour. Human reflexes weren't fast enough to take a hairpin turn at that kind of speed.

And then there was the size issue. Podracers were vehicles only in the most technical sense of the term. Leia had never seen one close up before, and she still couldn't believe this heap of loosely connected engine parts was supposed to take Luke through the racecourse. The tiny repulsorlift cockpit was connected by long, flexible cables to the two massive engines. Because the frame was so unstable, it was easily unbalanced. This was why most racers were less than one meter tall. The less weight in the cockpit, the less chance there was that the Podracer would flip over, dumping its driver.

In challenging courses, this happened to even the most experienced of drivers.

And Luke, by his own admission, had no experience at all.

"You sure you understand the controls?" Leia asked nervously, as Luke prepared to ignite the engines and take off for his first practice run. The droids stood by her side, freshly polished and buffed—Kenuun had treated them somewhat better than his human prisoners. "I'm sure one of the other Podracers would—"

"I know what I'm doing," Luke said irritably. "It's just like flying anything else, right?"

"Just hold on tight, kid," Han advised. "No need to go too fast your first time out."

Chewbacca let out a long growl.

"Well let's *hope* he knows not to do that," Han told the Wookiee. "Be a shame for him to crash before the race even starts."

## Alex Wheeler

Luke sighed. “I *was* the best pilot in Mos Eisley,” he reminded them, shifting uncomfortably in the seat. His knees were nearly grazing his chin. “And I’m the only one of us who’s actually seen a Podrace. I know what I’m doing.”

Before they could say anything else, the Podracer lifted off, a violet current crackling between the engines. Luke waved, and the Podracer sped away, so fast it was soon nothing but a smear of red against the grayish sky.

The engines twisted and wobbled alarmingly as Luke struggled to maintain the balance. The cockpit swung from side to side, then dipped forward, plummeting toward the ground.

“He can’t control it!” Leia gasped, peering through her electrobinoculars.

“He’ll be fine,” Han assured her. “The kid knows what he’s doing.” But he didn’t sound convinced.

“I hate to suggest this,” Elad said, “but it might be time to start thinking about a backup plan. If Luke can’t pull this off...”

He was only saying what she herself had been thinking, but something in Leia rebelled at his words. “Luke is the best pilot I’ve ever met,” she said fiercely.

“Hey!” Han protested.

“The *best*,” Leia repeated. “He just needs practice. He’ll be fine.”

Elad raised his eyebrows. “The best you’ve ever met?” He peered into the distance. The Podracer’s cockpit was bouncing furiously over air pockets. Thanks to his erratic steering, Luke was battling his own turbulence. “Even if he wins the race, Kenuun could still double cross us. Perhaps we should think about—”

“We’ll proceed with the current plan,” Leia said sharply, cutting off all further discussion. She may have let Elad accompany them on their mission, but she wasn’t about to cede control. “I have faith in Luke.”

## STAR WARS: Target

The Podracer listed precariously to the right side, as it returned toward them. A burst of orange flame exploded from the right engine.

“He’s overheating!” Han shouted, running toward the Podracer.

With one engine dead, steering was impossible. The Podracer shot into an out of control spin. The engines whirled wildly around the cockpit. Suddenly, the Podracer tilted vertically, and shot straight up in the air.

“Luke!” Leia cried, taking off after Han. The Podracer flipped upside down and screamed into a dive. It was still nearly a kilometer up in the air when a tiny figure toppled out of the cockpit.

An endless moment later, Luke’s chute inflated. He drifted slowly to the ground. The Podracer rocketed downward, hitting the ground with a deafening crash. It exploded on impact, gushing a fiery spray of fuel and shorn metal into the air.

Luke wrapped himself in the chute and rolled away from the crash site, trying to shield himself from the falling debris. Leia and the others had almost reached him when one of the slim, fiery strips of durasteel landed on his chute.

The parachute burst into flames.

## Chapter Eighteen

**L**uke was a ball of fire. Han slapped his coat at the burning parachute, trying to smother the flames.

“Roll over!” he shouted. Luke started rolling across the dirt. Slowly—too slowly—the flames flickered out.

The parachute was an ashen, blackened mess. The body hidden beneath lay motionless.

“Luke?” Leia said quietly, her voice filled with terror. “Luke!”

He moved.

Luke threw off the charred chute. His face was sooty and his body covered by sandy abrasions, but he was alive. He stood up. “I’m okay,” he said, stretching his limbs one at a time to make sure it was true. “I’m okay.”

A flood of relief washed over Han. “Close one, kid,” he said, trying to keep his voice light. If Luke had fallen from the Podracer any sooner, or any later...If his chute had malfunctioned, or if the armorweave hadn’t protected him from the flames...

Did Luke understand how close he’d come to the end? Han watched as Luke’s horrified gaze took in the simmering ruins of the Podracer.

He understood.

"The engine flamed out," Luke said, taking a few hesitant steps. "Must have been a defective current filter. I should have had Artoo double check it before I took off. Next time I'll know better."

"*Next time?*" Leia shook her head. "Luke, there's not going to be a next time. You almost died. The Podracer's destroyed."

"Kenuun wants to win this race—he'll give us another one," Luke said confidently.

"And is he going to give us another one of you?"

"Give him a break, princess." Han slung an arm around Luke. "The kid doesn't even know what he's saying."

Luke shrugged him off. "Yes I do. And a faulty current filter's not going to stop us from completing this mission. The Rebellion needs us to win this race."

*The Rebellion needs you to live*, Han thought.

But he kept his mouth shut.

Eventually, Luke got his way. Leia and Elad met with Kenuun in hopes of laying their hands on a second Podracer. The Muun had a hangar full of them—it seemed likely he'd be willing to produce another.

Han took Luke back to their makeshift campsite to rest. There were less than twenty-four hours to go before the race, and Luke knew every second counted. But he couldn't practice without a Podracer—and he had to admit, resting sounded good. His shoulder and back throbbed from the fall, and a deep series of scrapes along his back flared with pain wherever his shirt brushed the skin.

*It could have been worse*, he reminded himself. *Much worse.*

"Whatcha thinking?" Han asked, as they sat in front of their tent, watching the sun sink toward the horizon. A few of the Podracers swooped back and forth in the distance, getting in one more run before race day.

"I would've had it," Luke said. "I was getting control. If the engine hadn't flamed out—I would've had it."

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"I know, kid," Han said.

Luke looked at him in surprise. "You do?"

Han shrugged. "Sure. Don't forget, I saw you take on the Death Star. I know what you can do."

"Maybe," Luke said. He'd been doing his best to act confident—but it was just that. An act. He had to convince the others that he could fly the Podracer. It was the only way they'd go along with the plan. But Luke had seen a Podrace. He knew how fast the racers traveled, how challenging even a familiar course could be. How even in the best of circumstances, things could go wrong.

And when things went wrong in a Podrace, they went very wrong.

"You don't have to do this, you know," Han said, as if he could hear Luke's thoughts. "I wouldn't."

"I have to," Luke said. "It's the only way. And I know I can win. At least...if the Force is with me."

"Just how big an 'if' are we talking here?" Han asked.

Luke drew his lightsaber. Instead of activating the beam, he just cradled the hilt in his hands. He found the heft of the cool metal comforting. A reminder of the person he was supposed to be. "I can't control it," Luke admitted. "The harder I try, the more impossible it seems."

"You know I don't think much of this Force of yours," Han began.

Luke sighed. He wasn't in the mood. "Can we just—"

"Slow down, kid," Han said. "Let me finish." He frowned at the lightsaber. "I think most of it's a bunch of mumbo jumbo, and if you ask me, that Ben of yours was a few sabacc cards short of a deck. *But*—" He held up a hand to stop Luke from interrupting again. "He was a tough old guy. And he had...I don't know. Call it the Force, call it whatever you want. I saw him take on Vader—and that was something."

## STAR WARS: Target

"Something, maybe. But not enough." Luke closed his eyes for a moment, trying to block out the image of Vader's red beam striking that final, fatal blow.

"He knew what he was doing," Han said. "He could have run away, saved himself, sure. But he wasn't trying to save himself. He was trying to save *you*. And he got you off that ship."

Luke shook his head. "But that's just it. He sacrificed himself for *me*, so I could become a Jedi Knight—but I *can't*! Not without him. I can't use the Force, not when I need it. I let him down."

"So quit."

Luke scowled. "I can't do that. I'm not—" He stopped himself.

"Me?" Han smiled wryly. "Thanks for the compliment."

"I wasn't going to say that."

"Right." Han got serious. "I don't mean you should quit the fight. I mean you should quit trying so hard. Look, I may not know about this Jedi stuff, but I know ships, and I know *flying*. And what I know is that you've got to trust your ship. Let her tell you what she needs. The best pilots become part of their ships. And that's not something you *try* to do. You just do it. You've got to relax. Let it happen."

*Let go of your conscious self, Ben had urged him. Act on instinct.*

Maybe Han knew more about the Jedi way than he thought.

Han stood up, giving Luke a light slap on the back. "And when I say the best pilots, kid, I'm talking about you. Oh, one more thing."

"What?" Luke asked.

Han grinned. "Next time, try not to fall out."

## Chapter Nineteen

Han gulped down his second glass of lum. Chewbacca handed him another. They'd left Luke back at the campsite to study the map of the race circuit. Most of the other Podracers and their crew were crowded into a large tent, swigging drinks and swapping stories, and no one seemed to mind Han's presence. The noise helped drown out his thoughts.

When he'd left Luke, the kid had seemed more certain than ever that he could handle the Podrace. *Thanks to you*, he'd told Han. *Now I know I can do it.*

Han just wished he could be so sure.

And he wished that Luke had never said that: *Thanks to you*. Because now if something went wrong, Han would know exactly who to blame.

"Thought I'd find you two here," Elad said, pushing his way through the crowd to join Han and Chewbacca.

"Any luck with Kenuun?" Han asked.

"One Keizar-Volvec KV9T9-B Wasp, with a top speed of 800 km per hour and a fully functioning current filter. Luke's testing it out right now—he didn't want an audience."

Han just grunted, and took another swallow of his lum. It was watery and lukewarm, but it did the trick.

"Leia's keeping an eye on him," Elad added.



“Kid’s going to be fine,” Han mumbled. “We should all just relax.”

Elad nodded, but said nothing.

A Phlog appeared before them, his thick, greenish finger exploring the innards of his bulbous nose. “Rumor has it, you’re the folks who killed Grunta,” he growled.

Elad and Han exchanged a look. Chewbacca issued a warning growl. Han knew the prudent thing to do was deny it and walk away. That’s what Leia would have advised.

“Rumor’s right,” Han said.

The Phlog yanked his finger out of his nose, used it to stir his drink, then gulped the lum down in one shot. “Hey, these are the guys who killed Grunta!” he shouted to the crowd.

All noise and motion immediately ceased. Every face turned toward Han, Elad, and Chewbacca.

*Uh oh*, Han thought. But he was almost looking forward to a fight.

The crowd exploded into cheers. The Phlog slapped Han on the back and ordered another round of drinks. His treat.

“I’m guessing Grunta wasn’t a friend of yours?” Han asked, starting to get the picture.

“That piece of bantha slime?” The Phlog spit out a wad of purple phlegm. It spattered on the ground inches from Han’s boots. He held out a massive, sticky hand for Han to shake. “Haari Ikreme Beerde, at your service,” he said. “Any enemy of Grunta is a friend to us all.”

“You a Podracer?” Elad asked.

The Phlog shook his head, gesturing at his massive bulk. He was three times the size of an average Podracer. “Crew—for Gilag Pitaaani over there.” He pointed across the tent to a stubby Nuknog who was crushing a bottle of fizzbrew against his knobby skull. “We race for the Muun Chenik Kruun.” Haari Ikreme unleashed a rapid string of chokes and coughs that Han suspected might be laughter. “A cold-blooded, emotionless sand snake if I ever saw one, but when he heard about Grunta’s death,

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he nearly *smiled*. Nothing would make him happier than beating Nal Kenuun.”

“My master, too,” a Glymphid put in, raising a mug of lum with the suction cup at the end of one of his spindly fingers. “All these Muuns, they hate each other. But one thing unites them—they hate Kenuun more.”

“And why not?” Haari Ikreme said. “A colder, crueler being you’ll never meet.” He sputtered with his strange laughter again. “Unless you’re a krayt dragon, that is.”

“And why’s that?” Elad asked.

“Haven’t you heard?” Haari Ikreme asked in surprise. “Everyone knows that Kenuun loves nothing in this galaxy except his baby krayt dragon. The whole planet’s laughing about it behind his back. Of course, the last one foolish enough to laugh in front of him learned his lesson.”

“Kenuun punished him?” Han asked.

“Killed him,” the Glymphid said.

“And his family,” Haari Ikreme added. “Not that anyone could prove it. No, Kenuun’s smart. Just not smart enough to find himself a pilot who could actually win the race.”

“You should see what he’s got racing for him,” the Nuknog said, chortling. “We’re taking bets on how quickly the human dies. Low bid’s fifty, if you want in.”

Chewbacca growled. Han put a hand on his shoulder. Weapons weren’t allowed inside the tent, so they’d left their blasters back at the campsite. “Easy, buddy,” he murmured.

“I saw him out there this afternoon,” the Glymphid jeered. “Kenuun’s making a joke out of this whole race. We’ll be lucky if the human doesn’t take us all down with him when he goes.”

Haari Ikreme leaned toward Han. “*I’ll* be lucky if the human dies within the first ten kilometers,” he whispered. “I’ve got two thousand riding on it. Cross your fingers for me.”

Now it was Chewbacca who warned Han to take it easy. But Han was beyond listening to warnings. “That’s our *friend* you’re

talking about, buddy,” Han said through gritted teeth. “And he’s going to make it through that race and leave you all eating dust.”

Haari Ikreme and his friends burst into laughter. “You’re a funny one, Grunta-killer,” he gasped. “I like you!”

“No blasters,” murmured Elad, as a reminder.

Han ignored him. “Oh yeah? See how you like *this*.” And punched the Phlog in his squinched up, bulbous face.

The Glymphid was on top of him in seconds, grinding a small but powerful fist into Han’s stomach. Elad leaped into the fray. He pulled the Glymphid off of Han and tossed him into the air.

“This your idea of relaxing?” Elad shouted, as he fended off a blow from the dazed Phlog, then pivoted around to kick a lunging Nuknog in the stomach.

“Haven’t felt this relaxed in days!” Han shouted back, ducking just in time for two charging Sneevels to miss him and crash into each other. Soon every alien in the tent had entered the brawl. Kicks and punches flew wildly, bodies rolled through the dust.

Chewbacca had a Xexto and a Nuknog trapped in his mighty grasp. He roared as a Rodian broke a chair over his head. Han grabbed the Rodian by the shoulders and slammed him into the ground, leaping over his body just in time to avoid an Exodeenian’s six-armed punch.

Suddenly Haari Ikreme emerged from the chaos. He was holding a blaster pistol, aimed straight at Han. “Perhaps Grunta was a better friend to me than I knew,” the Phlog said. “Perhaps he needs to be avenged.”

“Easy, fella,” Han said, stalling. “Aren’t you forgetting something? What happens when *my* friends decide to avenge me?”

The Phlog cocked his weapon. “Something tells me pulling this trigger will make me more new friends than I can count. In fact, I—”

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He broke off, as a Glymphid sailed past them, slamming into the main strut holding up the tent. The strut snapped in two, toppling over and bringing the tent down on top of them with a soft sigh. Han took advantage of the distraction, knocking the blaster out of Haari Ikreme's hand. Before the Phlog could retaliate, he pushed his way through the fallen canvas, trying to find his way to the outside.

The brawl ended as the other fighters did the same, swiftly wriggling out from under the sunken tent. Han found Elad and Chewbacca, both bruised but intact.

"What do you say we get out of here," Han suggested, scanning the crowd for an angry Haari Ikreme. When it came to flash brawls like this, grudges were usually forgotten by morning.

But that was still a few hours away.

## Chapter Twenty

Podraces on Tatooine always drew crowds. Hundreds, even thousands of spectators, eager to watch the racers speed through the course. Even more eager to watch them crash and burn.

But here, there were no crowds.

Only the wealthiest, most elite gamblers of Muun society were given access to the secret race's location. Fewer than twenty Muuns had assembled in the deserted wilderness. Rather than exposing themselves to the day's blistering sunlight, they hovered in climate controlled transparisteel bubbles. Podrace cam droids would follow the racers through the course, beaming the images back to the Muuns' viewscreens. Wrecking crews stood by in case of a crash. There were no medical technicians. That was an expense the Muuns were unprepared to pay.

Especially since Podrace crashes rarely left survivors.

The starting point was located well outside of Pilaan, on a wide, dusty plain. In the distance loomed a rocky cliffside, split by a deep, narrow crevice. According to the map, navigating this would be the first hurdle of the race.

*Not a problem*, Luke told himself, waiting at the starting line. *I've got it under control*. His friends stood in a tight clump around him, all looking like they were attending a funeral. The other Podracers and their crews clustered a few feet away, staring at

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Luke. Han kept shooting nervous glances at a burly Phlog, but the others focused all their attention on Luke.

"Luke, I can't let you do this," Leia said in a worried voice. "What if something goes wrong again?"

But R2-D2 had checked and rechecked every inch of the Podracer. It was in full working order. If there was a failure, it wouldn't be a mechanical one.

"Nothing will go wrong," Luke said, sounding more certain than he felt. "I can win this."

"You could *die*," Leia reminded him.

Han glared at her. "Great pep talk, Your Worship."

"He doesn't need a pep talk," Leia said angrily. "He needs to hear the truth. And the truth is that he can't do this. No human can."

"It's true that statistically, Master Luke has very little chance of surviving this course," C-3PO put in, "but in fact a full search of the galactic Podracing records has revealed a historical precedent for—"

"I don't care if no human has ever done it before," Luke interrupted. "*I* can."

"So that's what this is about?" Leia asked hotly. "You're trying to prove something?"

"I'm *trying* to help the Alliance," Luke reminded her. "And if I die today, at least I'll die trying to do what's right. Some things are more important than my life, Leia. Bigger. *You* taught me that."

"Don't throw my words back at me, to defend a stupid idea like this," Leia shouted.

"Then I won't say anything else," Luke said quietly. "You know how I feel."

Leia narrowed her eyes. "Fine. I can't stop you. But I don't have to stick around here and watch you die."

She stormed away before Luke could respond.

"Where are you going?" Han called after her. "Come back!"

Luke shook his head. "Let her go," he said quietly. "She's right. It's better if she's not here for this."

"Hey, kid, you know you're going to be okay, right?" Han asked.

Chewbacca growled in agreement.

"We believe in you," Elad added. "Leia does, too."

"I know," Luke said. "And that's all I need."

But as his friends wished him good luck and joined the other crews, Luke knew that was a lie. He climbed into the Podracer as it was towed into position at the starting line. He was alone in this. It didn't matter whether his friends believed in him.

He had to believe in himself.

Luke eyed the other racers. To his immediate right was a Glymphid, his suction-tipped fingers piloting a red brute of a Podracer. The alien shot him a cocky grin. On his other side, a knobby-headed Nuknog glowered behind the controls of his Bin Gassi Quadrijet.

Luke shifted in his seat, trying to find the best position. His too-long limbs jutted out at all angles, and he was folded into the cramped cockpit built for a much smaller being. But before Luke could get comfortable, the starting lights glowed. Red...Orange...*Green!*

Wind and gravel bit into Luke's face as he surged forward. The Podracer was like a wild animal, bucking and heaving beneath him. The world swept past in smears of blue and gray. A constant thunder of air rumbled in his ears, and the billowing dust clouds blown up by the stream of Podracers nearly blinded him. He tipped left, then pulled to the right, but overcorrected. The Podracer listed to the side, nearly overturning. Luke pulled up hard, just barely holding his balance. Three of the other racers had all whizzed past, disappearing into the dark crevice in the cliffside.

The fourth, a quad-engined Balta-Trabatat BT310 flown by a Xexto, went in at the wrong angle, and smacked its lower left engine into the side of the cliff. It exploded. Flames rippled up

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the cables connecting the engine to the cockpit, and a moment later, the Xexto and his Podracer burst into a ball of fire.

Luke flew erratically, struggling to gain control. He tried to catch his breath, but choked on the acrid smoke streaming from the Xexto's wreckage. The Podracer was fighting him, shuddering at his touch. The cliff drew closer, a vertical sheet of rock. His body went rigid with fear. The entrance was only a few feet wider than the Podracer. If Luke miscalculated his approach, or if the Podracer spun out of control, his race would be over nearly before it began. Along with his life.

*No*, he thought furiously, relaxing his grip on the controls. *Don't think about that.*

*Don't think about anything.*

Luke took a deep breath. The Force was out there, he reminded himself. Surrounding him. Supporting him. It filled him, as it filled his ship. He wasn't strong enough, wasn't fast enough, to gain control over the Podracer.

But maybe he could be wise enough to release it.

Luke let his instincts take over. He stopped worrying about what might happen, or about what he had to do. He let the ship guide him. Exhilaration rushed through him, a sheer joy in speed.

The cliff towered over him.

Luke aimed the ship at the narrow opening of the crevice.

He accelerated, pushing the Podracer as fast as it could go.

And flew straight into the heart of the cliff.

The sunlight disappeared, consumed by darkness as he navigated the narrow, twisting tunnel that wound through the rock. Luke could almost anticipate the turns before they appeared. A sharp right, then two zig-zagging lefts, a hairpin curve around a jagged outcropping.

He'd memorized the map of the course, but he knew that wasn't it.

It was as if he could *feel* the shape of the course, the direction that the Podracer wanted to fly. As if they were alive, and a part of him. He pushed the Podracer even faster, twisting and turning



on instinct. A bulky Manta RamAir Podracer, piloted by the cocky Glymphid, appeared ahead of him. Luke shadowed him on the next turn, hugging the inside track. Sparks flew as his engines scraped against the wall of rock—but as they emerged on the straightaway, Luke pulled ahead. As the tunnel released them into open air, Luke passed two of the other racers, shooting ahead toward the next leg of the race.

He turned his face to the wind, jolted by the exhilaration of making it through. Back on Tatooine, he'd raced his T-16 through Beggar's Canyon, secretly imagining it was still part of the famous Mos Espa Podrace circuit. But no amount of imagining could have prepared him for the thrill and terror of an actual race. The deafening rumble of engines. The shuddering vibration of the cockpit, seeping into his bones. The gritty taste of dirt and exhaust fumes in his mouth, as he closed in on the leader, the Bin Gassi Quadrijet. The blur of color and light as the world streaked past.

Unlike the Podraces Luke had seen, this race had only one lap—which meant if he fell behind again, he'd have almost no chance of catching up. According to the map, he would soon reach Aliuun Gorge, a narrow, twisting ravine that tunneled through the earth. It would dead end at the base of a steep plateau, requiring a quick pull up and a near ninety degree climb. From there, he would face a labyrinthine network of underground caves and tunnels that fed into a spiraling vertical passage. If he made it through, it would eventually eject him onto the wide plains for the final straightaway.

The narrow path through the cliff wall had been, by far, the easiest obstacle he would encounter. Luke squeezed the controls, increasing his thrust. His grip nearly slipped as the Podracer shot forward, bouncing roughly on the Bin Gassi's wake. He felt no fear, only the urge to push harder, to go faster.

A cool certainty flowed through him. He was going to survive.

More than that: He was going to win.

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“Unbelievable!” Haari Ikreme Beeerd lowered his electrobinoculars and turned to Han, whom he had apparently decided to forgive in the spirit of the race. “Your human’s actually pulling ahead.” He shook his lumpy head in confusion. “I never thought he’d make it past the gorge, much less the corckscrew. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“I have,” a grizzled Rodian said. “Though not since that kid back on Tatooine. You’re all too young to remember—but I’ll never forget. That was something.”

“*This* is something,” Haari Ikreme countered. He pulled out a stack of credits, muttering to himself. “I wonder if it’s too late to change my bet.”

The assassin calling himself Tobin Elad peered at the viewscreen, but he was listening intently to the chatter around him. He had assumed his target would be an alien. The piloting skills required to destroy the Death Star were considered beyond human capabilities. Everyone knew that to be true.

But now here was another truth: Luke Skywalker had capabilities like no other human.

“Here they come!” the Rodian shouted, pointing into the distance. Four Podracers appeared on the horizon, screaming toward the finish line.

“He’s actually doing it!” Han exclaimed, pounding X-7 on the back.

Luke was pulling up fast on the inside, edging around the Bin Gassi Podracer that had fallen behind after an early lead. The Nuknog at the controls swung a hard left, trying to bump Luke out of the way. Luke weathered the attempt, nudging past the Bin Gassi. The alien veered toward Luke again, too hard, and flung himself into a wild spin. Careening out of control, he nearly crashed into the Vokoff-Strood and the Radon-Ulzer battling it out for the lead. As they struggled to avoid the spiraling Bin Gassi, Luke surged ahead, steering effortlessly around the

## STAR WARS: Target

Nuknog. The cam droids clocked his speed at nearly 850 kilometers per hour.

“He’s in the lead!” Han shouted. “I knew the kid had it in him!”

X-7 cloaked his face in a hearty grin.

*Is it you?* he wondered, watching as Luke’s Podracer crossed the finish line, two full seconds ahead of his nearest competitor. *Are you the one I seek?*

If so, Luke’s extraordinary piloting skills wouldn’t be enough to save him.

*You escaped death today, X-7 thought coldly. But if you’re the pilot I’m looking for, you’ll never escape me.*

## Chapter Twenty-One

Kenuun's home was nothing like Mak Luunim's. Luunim's apartment had been all gold and silver, loud ostentation that screamed of wealth. Kenuun's apartment, while just as large, was nearly empty. It contained only a few pieces of sleek black furniture, nearly invisible against the black walls. Floor to ceiling transparisteel windows looked down on the Pilaan skyline, and Han realized they must be in one of the tallest buildings in the city. There was wealth here, too, but it was a quiet, careful wealth.

In Han's experience, that was the most powerful kind—and the most dangerous.

"I don't like this," he murmured to Luke and Elad. "We should have insisted on getting the disk at the race. Coming back here feels too risky."

Chewbacca was back at the *Millennium Falcon* with the droids, readying it for take off. As soon as they had the disk in hand, they would be ready to track down Leia and leave this planet behind. It would be a simple, straightforward exchange. If Kenuun followed through with his side of the bargain. Still flush with his unexpected triumph, Luke was acting like they had the mission all wrapped up. But Han's gut was telling him the day was about to become interesting.

And not in a good way.

"Okay, we're here," Han said gruffly. "Now: the datacard."

Kenuun stood on the opposite side of the room, his long arms laced behind his back. "Certainly, but first, won't you sit down? Enjoy a celebratory meal with me? I am, after all, so delighted at our success." If he felt any delight, he was hiding it well. The Muun's face was as stern and expressionless as always.

"We'll just take the datacard and go," Luke said. "As we agreed."

Kenuun nodded. "Of course, of course. Anything for the winning pilot." He tipped his head. "Although, if I could persuade you to stay on, perhaps enter another race—"

"I'll just take the datacard," Luke said.

The Muun nodded again, then pressed a console on the wall. A silk tapestry parted to reveal a silver safe. He thumbed the keypad, and the safe lid opened. Kenuun retrieved a slim datacard, holding it out to Han. "I believe this is what you've been looking for?"

Han inserted the datacard into his datapad and confirmed it. The Muun had upheld his side of the bargain after all. "Pleasure doing business with you, Nal."

"And you as well," the Muun said slowly. "*Captain Solo.*"

Han froze. He'd never given the Muun his real identity. None of them had.

"Oh yes," Nal Kenuun said. *Now* he smiled. "I know who you are. All of you." He signaled with a spindly finger, and four stormtroopers emerged from hidden niches in the wall. They positioned themselves around the room, one in each corner, blasters aimed. "There's a bounty on your head, Captain Solo—and yours, too, Tobin Elad. I expect that should be enough to repay me what I'm owed. With interest."

"We owe you nothing," Han snarled.

"Not you," the Muun said coolly. "The boy." He narrowed his eyes at Luke. "That was a rather valuable vehicle you destroyed in your 'practice' session."

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Luke's eyes widened. "It was defective!"

"Be that as it may, the Podracer was intact when it left my possession," Kenuun said. "Now it's a heap of desert rubble. And as you know, debts must be repaid."

"So let *me* pay," Luke said defiantly. "I'm the one who crashed it. Let the rest of them go, I'll stay here—"

"Luke!" Han protested.

"*I'll stay*," Luke said loudly, over Han's objections. "I'll win another race for you."

"Yes, you *will* stay. And you will certainly race again." Kenuun nodded slowly. "But next time, you may not survive. Leaving the debt unpaid. A bounty, on the other hand, is certain to line my pockets with credits. I may be a gambler when it suits me—but it's not the way of the Muun to pass up opportunities for sure financial gain."

"I thought it wasn't the way of the Muun to break contracts," Han pointed out. "We had a deal." He jerked a thumb at Luke. "The kid here put his life on the line for you."

Kenuun flashed a cruel smile. "Our agreement was for the boy's services, in return for your disk. Which, as you may have noticed, you now have in your possession. The terms of our contract included nothing about what was to happen once our exchange was concluded. I never offered you safe passage off the planet, or off my property."

"You do have a point," Han said, stalling as he tried furiously to think of a plan.

"And I do have a rather large bounty on my head," Elad added.

"Nothing compared to mine, I'm sure," Han said.

"I wouldn't be *too* sure—I'm a dangerous man," Elad countered.

"Yeah?" Han whipped out his blaster and shot down the nearest guard. "Prove it!"

## STAR WARS: Target

But Elad was already in motion, a sharp kick sweeping the legs out from one of the stormtroopers while he simultaneously fired at another one on the opposite side of the room.

Luke dodged a barrage of fire, diving over a couch. He swore as one of the guards shot the blaster out of his hand, then activated his lightsaber, lashing out with the glowing beam. The stormtrooper darted out of his reach, then fired again. Luke grunted in pain and toppled backward as the laserfire blasted into his shoulder.

Han rushed to help—then stopped, as he felt something sharp jab him in the back.

“Drop it,” the guard’s flat voice ordered.

Han raised his arms, letting his blaster clatter to the floor. Luke groaned and sat up—but a blaster in the face stopped him from going any further. The other two stormtroopers lay on the ground, unconscious or dead. Han grimaced—they’d almost managed to win.

But when blasters were involved, almost didn’t count.

“Why don’t *you* drop it,” Elad suggested in a dry voice.

Han craned his neck around to see Elad standing at the entrance of the room, his blaster pressed against Nal Kenuun’s narrow head.

“You shoot them, I’ll shoot your boss,” Elad warned.

The Muun appeared unfazed. “We seem to be at an impasse,” he said serenely. “What do you propose?”

“How about you let us walk out of here, and we don’t shoot you where you stand,” Han growled.

“I hardly think *you’re* in a position to be making offers,” Kenuun said. In case his point wasn’t clear, the stormtrooper jabbed Han with the blaster again. Hard.

“I propose a trade,” Elad said. “Let them go free, and I’ll remain here as your prisoner. The boy’s worth nothing to you, and the bounty on Han is negligible compared to mine.”

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"Negligible?" Han asked incredulously. "There's nothing negligible about the amount that Jabba wants me dead. Trust me."

"You speak the truth," the Muun told Elad. "And your offer interests me."

"Can we go back to the negligible thing?" Han persisted. "Half the bounty hunters in the galaxy are after me! I don't know who this guy is or what he did, but when it comes to rewards, I'm the one you want, trust me."

Kenuun ignored him. "You will sacrifice your weapon and remain here peaceably until I turn you in for a reward?"

Elad nodded. "But *only* if you guarantee the *Millennium Falcon*—its *entire* crew—safe passage off planet. No more technicalities or loopholes this time."

"Elad, you can't do this!" Luke protested, rising to his feet. The guard's blaster stayed trained on him.

"It's like you said, Luke. Some things are more important than an individual life. Of course, I didn't intend for the life in question to be mine, but..." Elad smiled grimly. "Fortunately, there's no one left to mourn the loss."

The Muun made his decision. "I accept your offer, Tobin Elad. You have a deal."

"I think we still need to negotiate some of the finer points," Leia said, stepping into the room, her blaster at the ready. In her other hand, she held an odd length of rope, tethered to something hidden behind the doorframe.

"Leia?" Han said in disbelief. "What are *you* doing here?"

Leia raised her eyebrows. "You didn't actually expect the Muun to keep his word, did you? We figured a backup plan might be in order."

Han scowled at the princess. Why did she always insist on putting herself in danger? "Funny, last I checked, *we* included *me*."



"Well, this time, it included *Luke*," she said, smirking. "You were busy. Something about a fistfight with a loudmouthed Phlog?"

"I hate to interrupt," Kenuun said coldly, "but I fail to see how this trespasser's appearance affects the equation. Unless perhaps she'd like to offer herself up as a sacrifice as well?"

"Thought about that," Leia said. "But then I came up with a better idea." She stepped farther into the room, revealing that the rope she held was actually a leash. It was attached to a golden collar, fastened around the neck of a slobbering krayt dragon, measuring less than a meter from its sharp horns to the tip of its spiny tail. Its forked tongue flickered around its yellowish lips.

"Urgiluul!" the Muun cried, exhibiting the first real sign of alarm. "What have you done to her?"

"Nothing." Leia lowered the tip of her blaster until it was aimed at the dragon's scaly face. "Yet."

"You must be *careful*," the Muun urged. "The pearl forming inside her is *extremely* delicate—and any malformations would significantly detract from its value."

"*That's* why you're such a softie about the dragon?" Han asked in disgust. "Because it can make you money?"

"What other possible value could any creature have?" the Muun asked disdainfully.

"Not everything's about money," Han said. Leia glanced sharply at him, surprise in her eyes. *So that's what she really thinks of me*, Han realized. *She thinks I'm like him*.

"Not everything," Kenuun agreed. "Just everything that matters." Still, there was no denying the concern in his eyes as he tracked the tip of Leia's blaster. Whatever the reason, he wanted that dragon to remain intact.

Kenuun hesitated.

"Drop your weapons," he said finally. "You may go." As swiftly and silently as the guards appeared, they vanished. He held out his hand to Leia. "The leash, if you please?"

## Alex Wheeler

“You will accompany us back to our ship,” Leia said in an imperious tone. It was suddenly easy for Han to imagine her on the floor of the Galactic Senate. “When we are ready to take off, then and only then, will I return your property.”

“But I *guarantee* your safe passage off the planet and out of the atmosphere,” the Muun pleaded, his fingers clutching compulsively as if gripping an invisible leash. He struggled to retain his dignity, even while begging. “I am a *Muun*, after all. That should be guarantee enough that I will keep my word.”

“Maybe it should be,” Leia said, tugging on the leash so the krayt dragon was forced to heel. “But it’s not.”

## Chapter Twenty-Two

You weren't *actually* going to kill that helpless little dragon, were you?" Luke asked, grinning. The *Falcon* had just made the jump to hyperspace. Now that the Rebellion's financial codes were safely in hand and Muun was dropping further away by the second, everyone was in good spirits. "Helpless?" Han snorted. "Tell that to the last guy I know who tangled with a krayt dragon. Might be a kind of one-sided conversation though, seeing as how he ended up in pieces."

"I figured Kenuun would give in," Leia said with more than a hint of pride. "I only snuck in there to provide you with some backup, if you needed it—but when I spotted the dragon, I remembered what Han heard from the Podracers. Negotiation seemed like a somewhat better option than blasting our way out."

"Ah ha!" Han said triumphantly. "So the truth comes out. Lucky thing I went into that tent, or I wouldn't have been able to provide the crucial information."

"Lucky thing you came out of that tent alive," Leia retorted, "given the way you were acting."

"What about you?" Han shot back. "Sneaking into Kenuun's place like that."

## Alex Wheeler

"And *I* still can't believe you didn't realize Luke and I staged that argument for Kenuun's benefit. You really think I would pick a fight with him before he was about to risk his *life*?"

Han glared at her. "I *thought* we were a team. Which means when you come up with some insane plan, you fill me in."

"Oh, you would've been all for it?"

"I would've told you it was crazy! I never would have let you do something like that."

"Exactly why I didn't tell you."

"You want to know your problem, princess?" Han asked.

Leia leaned forward. "Amaze me."

"You don't think before you act."

"I don't think?" she asked incredulously.

"That's right." He stretched out in his chair, suddenly enjoying himself. "You don't think, and so you get yourself into these crazy situations, and I've got to come in and rescue you."

"*You've* got to rescue *me*?" Leia said. She stood up. "Chewbacca!" she shouted down the corridor. "Chewbacca, get up here!"

"What do you want with him?" Han asked.

"I want him to turn this ship around and head straight back to Muun, you egotistical, nerf-brained buffoon!" Leia snapped. "We'll drop you off at Kenuun's place, and you can see how well you do without *me* there to rescue *you*."

"Yeah, Chewie, get up here!" Han shouted. "Tell *Her Highness* that her rescuing me *once* doesn't cancel out the twenty times I've risked my neck to rescue her."

"And you can tell this Kowakian monkey-lizard that no one asked him to!" Leia shouted, even louder.

But instead of the Wookiee, Elad appeared in the doorway. "I didn't mean to interrupt," he said politely. "I was just looking for Luke. That is, if you're still interested in doing some hand-to-hand combat training."

"Of course!" Luke said eagerly.

Han suspected he was just happy for an excuse to escape all the bickering. Han couldn't blame him. But he couldn't force himself to stop—not if it meant letting Leia get the last word.

"Luke, wait." Leia stood up. "I need to talk to Elad for a moment. If that's all right with him, of course."

"Of course," Elad said. "Consider me at your service."

*We were in the middle of something*, Han thought irritably, as Leia and Elad left the cockpit. Nothing important, of course. Nothing they couldn't argue about later.

But he couldn't help wondering what she wanted to talk to Elad about—in private.

*I'm sure it's nothing important*, he told himself. Not that he cared.

Not at all.

"I want to apologize," Leia said, once they were alone in her quarters.

Elad looked confused. "For what?"

Leia hesitated. Apologies didn't come easily to her. And there was nothing she disliked more than being proven wrong. "For not trusting you," Leia admitted. "You put yourself in danger for us—for the Rebellion—again and again. I should have seen that your motives were pure."

"You're wise to be cautious," Elad assured her. "I would feel the same."

Leia shook her head. "I heard what you said to Kenuun. You were willing to give your life to save Han and Luke. Near strangers."

"Not for them," Elad corrected her. "For the Rebellion. They can be more valuable to the cause than I can—and, as I told you, this the only cause I have. Fighting the Empire is my only reason to go on."

"Then join us!" Leia said. It wasn't an impulse. She'd been thinking about this for days. Elad was exactly the kind of man they needed in the Rebellion: Smart, brave, loyal.

## Alex Wheeler

*Like Han could be, she thought sadly. If he ever stops running from who he really is.*

"I don't know," Elad said. "I'm pretty used to going it alone. The idea of being part of something again..." He shook his head. "Letting people into your life always seems like a good idea at the start. But it can end...badly."

Leia knew what he was referring to. Her heart clenched. "Just think about it," she said softly, putting a hand on his shoulder. "You can't lock yourself away from the world forever." She hadn't touched him since the first day they'd spoken. Since then, she had barely trusted herself to speak to him. She hadn't wanted to risk opening herself up again. Whenever she looked in his eyes, all she could see was the pain of her own losses reflected back at her. But now, for the first time, she didn't look away. "You're better off for having known your wife and your child," she said hesitantly, unsure of whether she was crossing an invisible line. "The time you shared with them is worth suffering the pain of their absence."

Elad jerked away from her. "You can't know that."

"I can," Leia drew a deep, shuddering breath. Maybe it was time to take her own advice. She'd kept her feelings—her pain—locked up for so long. Maybe just saying the words out loud, just telling *someone* about what she had lost, maybe that would help salve the wound. "I can know, because...because of Alderaan."

Her voice caught on the word.

Elad's expression didn't change. It was as if he'd known this moment would arrive. "Do you want to talk about it?"

She had already decided on her answer, but was surprised to find how deeply she meant it. "Yes."

X-7 confirmed that his encrypted communication line was secure, then activated the transmission. The others were all in the main hold, so there was no risk anyone would overhear. "I've gained the trust of the Rebels," he informed the Commander. It was a relief to drop the hearty heroism of the Elad persona and

## STAR WARS: Target

relax into the blankness of his true self. “The goal is close at hand.”

“Excellent,” the Commander replied. “I expect you to secure the information about our target as soon as possible. Time is of the essence.”

“I may already have a lead.”

“Keep me informed,” the Commander said, and signed off.

X-7 decided to join the others in the main hold. No need to sequester himself anymore, now that their leader had accepted him.

More than accepted him, he thought with cool pleasure. Sought comfort in him. Friendship. He had done well in his formulation of the Tobin Elad identity. As predicted, the wounded, noble warrior was exactly the person Leia wanted in her life. Even if she hadn’t realized it until “Elad” appeared.

These humans were all so trusting, X-7 thought in disgust. So eager to believe in what they saw on the surface. They believed in the bond that drew them together. They thought it made them strong. And maybe it did. But their secrets kept them apart.

And that made them weak.

They may have fancied themselves as cautious, but it was a joke. They looked at X-7 and saw what they wanted to see—what *he* wanted them to see.

For Han, he would be a brother in arms. The bounty had been a nice touch, X-7 thought, congratulating himself on constructing such a thorough false identity. Kenuun had done him a true service by digging into “Elad’s” records. There could surely be no faster way of gaining Han’s trust.

For Leia, he would be her equal, the bold warrior as committed to the fight as she was. He would be what she wished Han Solo could be—a secret she hid even from herself.

But there were no secrets from X-7.

For Luke? For Luke, he would be a confidante, the one man who believed he would achieve his Jedi destiny.

## Alex Wheeler

And this was no act: X-7 believed. He had seen Luke pilot that Podracer—he knew what the boy was capable of. And if Luke was his target, well...a Jedi Knight would make a formidable adversary. But by his own admission, Luke was no Jedi. Not yet.

X-7 stood silently at the edge of the main hold, unobserved. Observing.

Watching as Leia and Han peered at a datapad, bickering loudly over its contents.

Watching as the Wookiee played a game of dejarik with the golden protocol droid, growling whenever it fell behind.

Watching as Luke—expert pilot, aspiring Jedi, possibly the Rebellion’s great hope—fumbled with his lightsaber. The blue beam flashed as he struggled to deflect shots fired by the astromech droid, missing one after another. A moment later, he stumbled over his own feet, toppling backward and landing on the floor in a heap.

X-7 rarely experienced emotions. But thinking of these pathetic humans believing they were a match for any of their enemies—much less an enemy like him—X-7 allowed himself a genuine smile.

*This is going to be even easier than I thought.*









# ***HOSTAGE***

BY ALEX WHEELER





## Chapter One

**D**ay never came to the swamp. The dank air, thick with swirling fumes, shrouded the land in eternal fog. The distant sun emitted only a dim glow, turning the sky a sallow green that matched his skin. Until, all too soon, night fell once again.

He, who had devoted his life to the light, now lived in darkness. It seemed the universe liked a good joke.

And so he laughed.

“Too dark to see my breakfast, it is,” he chortled, stirring some rootleaf and gnarltree bark into the bowl of butcherbug stew. He wrinkled his nose at the foul stench. “Perhaps lucky, I am, hmm.”

He spoke to himself often here. Another joke: That he, who had taken such joy in others, was alone. Alone in an empty swamp; alone on an empty planet.

Alone, yet not alone: He still had the Force.

It was a Padawan’s first lesson: Learn to trust your senses—and learn to reach beyond them. He did not need light to see.

Nor did he need to see the faces of his allies to know they were there.

“Waiting for you, I have been,” he said softly, hunched over the makeshift stove. His stew bubbled over the flame. Another

## Alex Wheeler

Padawan lesson: When the time comes to eat, *eat*. Food runs out. So does time.

His modest hut had been empty for a long time. For many years, his shuffling footsteps had been the only ones to cross the threshold; his halting wheeze had been the only breath to mist across the still air.

He was alone still—and yet, not alone.

“I have failed, Master,” the voice said.

He shook his head. “Failed, we all have,” he said. “Succeed, we all may. Undetermined, the future is.” He had seen the future in his dreams. Cloudy visions of blood and fire, terror mixed with hope, death with awakening.

“I have much to tell you,” the voice said urgently.

He rummaged through a pile of junk, pulling out a misshapen spoon. He had crafted it himself from a fallen gnarltree branch. “Patience, Obi-Wan,” he said, finally turning to face the spirit of the fallen Jedi. “Talk, we will, hmm, yes. But first, eat, I must.”

As Obi-Wan Kenobi’s shimmering figure looked on, casting a soft glow of light around the dark cave, the great Jedi Master Yoda shuffled over to a narrow wooden table. He lowered his frail, stooped body onto a wobbly stool.

And he ate his breakfast.

“He’s powerful, Master Yoda,” Obi-Wan said. “I can sense it within him. Young, but—”

“Young, yes.” Yoda nodded. “And old, too. Yes, yes. Too old?” Never had a Jedi begun his training as an adult. Brought to the Jedi Temple as infants, they grew up knowing nothing but the Jedi way. In Yoda’s long memory, only one exception had been made on this front. One Padawan so promising that it seemed foolish not to train him, though he was already nine years old, with memories of a different world and attachments to a different life.

## STAR WARS: Hostage

The Jedi Council had allowed the training to proceed, though they'd had their doubts. Rather than trusting his judgment, Yoda had put his trust in Qui-Gon Jinn—and Anakin Skywalker.

Yes, they had all failed, one way or another.

"He's impatient," Obi-Wan admitted. His face was webbed by deep creases, his eyes underlined with dark hollows. Death had not relieved him of the burdens he carried. "And stubborn."

"Remind me, that does, of another young Jedi."

Obi-Wan frowned. "No. The boy is nothing like his father."

"Not Anakin," Yoda said mildly. "You." He smiled, remembering the brash young man who, from the start, had wielded his lightsaber like it was a part of him.

"The boy must be trained, but he is impulsive," Obi-Wan said. "Courageous, bright, loyal, yes—and yet, quick to anger, impatient. Perhaps too willing to choose the easy path."

"Human, he is," Yoda pointed out. "Flawed, all living beings are."

"He has greatness in him," Obi-Wan said. "Of that I am sure. But as to what form the greatness will take..." He hung his head. "I was sure about Anakin, too. Once."

"Responsibility, we must all take," Yoda said firmly. "You, for your choice. Me, for mine. *Anakin*—only Anakin—for his."

Obi-Wan paused, the guilt plain on his face. Yoda knew he blamed himself. For Anakin, for Darth Vader...for all that followed.

"We need Luke," Obi-Wan said. "But if we proceed too quickly...if we make the wrong choices..." He sighed. "I sense great power in him, perhaps greater even than Anakin's."

"Search inside yourself," Yoda said. "Know the answer, you do."

"He is too old for us to shape," Obi-Wan said slowly, as if sifting through his thoughts as he spoke. "He is neither Padawan nor Master. He has grown into his own person, without our help or interference—now we must give him the space to grow into his own man." Obi-Wan sighed, gazing out at the murky bog,

## Alex Wheeler

then up at the stars. “He will be tested—I cannot save him from that. He *must* be tested. Perhaps this was our mistake with Anakin. Not that we found him too late, but that we put too much upon him too soon. We burdened him with power he could not control, with responsibility he could not bear. This time, we must be cautious—let Luke become the man he needs to be. And hope that this is the man *we* need him to be.”

Yoda nodded. This was the same judgment he had reached. “Ready, he is not,” Yoda said. “Patient we must be.”

They could not let fear of Luke’s future prevent them from training the boy. But they could equally not let their own eagerness for a champion fool them into seeing something that wasn’t there.

And, of course, Luke was not their only hope.

There was another.



## Chapter Two

Princess Leia Organa felt a prickly tingle run up her spine—someone was watching her.

She didn't turn around. "See anything that interests you?" She kept her eyes focused on the data-pad in her lap, but the screen might as well have been blank. She hadn't been able to concentrate for hours. The closer they got to their destination, the faster her thoughts seemed to swim away from her.

"Not a thing, Princess." Normally, Han Solo's sarcastic drawl made her want to put her fist through a bulkhead. But at a moment like this, Han's voice—his presence—was almost a comfort.

Almost.

"Well?" she snapped. "What is it?"

"You asked me to let you know when we dropped out of hyperspace," he reminded her. "This is me, letting you know."

Leia suppressed a shudder. Or, at least, she tried to.

She heard Han take a step into the cabin. Then another. "Leia..."

"I'll join you in the cockpit in a few minutes," she said coolly, keeping her back to him and her posture rigid. "I want to watch the approach."

## Alex Wheeler

"It'll be a rough one."

"I think I can handle it."

"You *think* you can handle anything," Han countered. "That's the problem."

"No, the problem is *you* trying to tell me what I can and can't do." The banter was making her feel more normal than she had all day. *Guess being trapped in space with a nerf-herding laserbrain has its advantages*, she thought.

"Maybe you forget, Your Highnessness, but I'm captain of this bird. That means I say what *everyone* can and can't do."

"And *I* say I'll be joining you in the cockpit in a few minutes," she said, durasteel in her voice.

She heard his footsteps retreat toward the door. "You know, you don't have to do this."

Leia brushed a hand across her cheek, enraged to find it dotted with moisture. She shut her eyes and took a deep, shaky breath. Then she finally faced him. "Yes," she said, in a low, dangerous voice. "I do."

"Suit yourself, Princess." He snorted. "You always do."

She waited until he was gone, then wrapped her arms across her chest, encasing herself in a tight hug. "Pull yourself together," she murmured. "It's just another landing."

And it would be. Landing on Delaya would be total routine—but to get there, they would have to make it through a dangerous storm of debris. Millions of whirling meteors, some no larger than her fist, others several times more massive than the *Millennium Falcon*. A collision could prove fatal.

Except it wasn't *debris*, Leia thought. It wasn't *trash*.

It was all that remained of the planet Alderaan. What had been a thriving planet, home to two billion people, was now nothing more than a few rocks spiraling through the emptiness of space.

Leia set the datapad beside her on the bunk. She twisted her hair back into two long braids and wrapped them around her head. Then she stood.

## STAR WARS: Hostage

She wasn't ready—but the moment had arrived, ready or not. It was time to go home.

Han muttered a silent curse as Leia climbed into the cockpit. With the densest debris field this side of the galaxy to navigate, the last thing he needed was a distraction. Especially the worrying-about-Leia kind of distraction.

He wasn't supposed to have to worry about anyone but himself. And now, all of a sudden, he was mixed up in this ridiculous Rebel Alliance business, saddled with a handful of trouble-making passengers and their annoying droids.

In addition to the princess, there was Luke Skywalker, who fancied himself some kind of Jedi warrior—and who was lucky he hadn't sliced off an arm with that lightsaber of his. Yet. There was Tobin Elad, the resistance fighter they'd picked up on the way to Muunilinst—an impressive pilot, an even more impressive fighter, a quick thinker, no friend to the Empire...Han might even have enjoyed having him around. *Might*—if the princess hadn't made it so painfully clear that she found Elad superior in every way that counted. He could do nothing wrong. While Han, as far as Leia was concerned, could do nothing right.

*Fine with me*, he thought. It was time to start treating this like any other job. He would drop them on Delaya, as promised—but that would be the end of it. He had a life of his own, after all. People to scam, places to go, Hutts to repay.

"Entering the Alderaan system." Han cut the thrusters to reduce speed. "Delaya's on the other side of the debris field. No way around but straight through." The storm of whirling rock loomed in the viewscreen. Delaya lay just beyond. Once it had been Alderaan's sister planet.

Now it was an only child.

Leia's face paled. Luke's jaw tightened. Chewbacca let loose a mournful howl.

Han couldn't blame him. You could almost feel it pressing in around you: *death*. Two billion lives, gone up in a ball of flame.

## Alex Wheeler

For a single, horrifying moment, he imagined their faces—pale, terrified, *dead*—flattening themselves against the cockpit window.

*I feel a great disturbance in the Force, as if millions of voices suddenly cried out in terror and were suddenly silenced*, the old man had said. Like he could sense it happening.

Han shook it off. *You're starting to sound like Luke*, he warned himself. *You're not sensing anything but a rough landing. And if you don't start focusing on these rocks, there might not be a landing at all.*

"Better strap in," he warned his passengers. As he spoke, the ship lurched as a large rock slammed into the starboard deflector shield. Caught off guard, Leia toppled forward. Han caught her just before she crashed into an instrument panel. "You okay?" he said, trying to steady her.

She ripped her arm away. "I'll be *okay* when we land this thing," she snapped. "How about you try focusing on that."

"Yes, ma'am," he said sarcastically. "But only because you asked so nicely." She had some nerve, giving him orders on the bridge of *his* ship. Who did she think she—

"Whoa!" Han swore, jerking the *Falcon* sharply to the port side, moments before crashing into a ship-sized asteroid. "Focus. Right. Good plan."

Chewbacca growled at the viewscreen.

"I see it, buddy," Han said, steering the ship around another asteroid. They were hurtling toward him from all sides now. He eased the *Falcon* through the gaps, diving and weaving to avoid the larger rocks. The smaller ones battered the shields. The ship shook and shuddered, the controls vibrating in his grip. Behind him, somewhere in the bowels of the ship, there was a soft hissing noise, then a loud bang. A moment later, the acrid scent of smoke trickled into the cockpit. "Chewie, the aft deflector must have taken a hit. Get back there and check it out!"

The Wookiee was already in motion. Luke's astromech droid followed closely on his heels.

"Captain, may I recommend that you avoid crashing into anything else?" the protocol droid C-3PO suggested.

## STAR WARS: Hostage

“May I recommend you take a long walk through a short airlock?” Han growled, swerving to starboard and then sharply to port, as another flood of debris washed over them.

“Oh dear, my circuits simply can’t take much more of this,” C-3PO cried, as the ship shook beneath him. “At least the situation can’t become any more dire.”

Han slammed a fist against the control panel. “Don’t you know better than to jinx us with—” A blaring alarm drowned out the rest of his words, and the air thickened with a foul gray smoke. “What was that?” C-3PO cried.

Han groaned. “*That* was the situation about to get more dire. A *lot* more.”

## Chapter Three

Chewie's panicked bark came through the comlink.

"What'd he say?" Luke asked, feeling a little green around the edges as the ship swayed and bucked beneath him.

Han ignored him because he was busy keeping the ship from getting blown to bits. Without thinking, Luke clenched his hand around the hilt of his light-saber. Not that this was the kind of danger he could take on with the laser sword, but reaching for it had become instinctual. The Jedi weapon usually made him feel stronger, ready to meet whatever challenge lay ahead.

Now it just made him feel useless. Luke could neither fly the ship nor repair it, and although Leia was pale with tension, she'd made it clear she didn't need his help either. He could do nothing but watch.

"Chewbacca says the shields are at ten percent power," C-3PO translated. "And that—*oh dear*. And that one more big hit and we're finished!"

"Then we'll just have to make sure we don't hit anything, won't we?" Han said through gritted teeth.

The *Millennium Falcon* rocketed up in a nearly ninety-degree climb, shooting past one pitted asteroid, then squeezing through the narrow gap between two more, with meters to spare.

"Watch out!" Leia cried.

"*Watching*," Han muttered. "Now strap in and keep quiet unless you want to fly this bird yourself?"

A string of chirps and beeps came through the comlink.

C-3PO tapped Han's shoulder. "Excuse me, captain, I hate to trouble you with additional bad news, but if you have a moment I feel I should relay—"

Han groaned. "Spit it out, you rusty circuit brain!"

"The deflector shields are down," C-3PO reported.

The ship shook with such force it felt like it was going to fly apart. And that's if they were *lucky*. At this speed, without deflectors, even a fist-sized rock could punch through a porthole and depressurize the ship. If it hit the engines, or the laser cannons...

Luke told himself he was overreacting. Surely if things were that bad, Han would let them know it was time to panic.

"Get your vac suits on!" Han shouted. "Initiate emergency procedures."

Time to panic. Luke jumped out of the co-pilot seat, then froze. "Han—"

"No time to chat, kid," Han snapped. "*Go*."

"But Han—"

Han whipped the ship hard to port. "Even the Jedi can't breathe in a vacuum, kid. Trust me. Get your suit."

Luke grimaced. Did Han have to be so *stubborn*, even at a time like this? He was laser-focused on the tiny pocket of space just ahead. It may have been the only way to steer the *Falcon* on its narrow path to safety. But it meant he was missing the big picture. "Han," Luke said firmly. "*Look*."

The path ahead of them was almost entirely clear. The debris field lay behind them. Delaya hovered in the distance, a globe of bluish-violet gleaming in the light of the sun.

Han's face stretched into a crooked grin. "See? Nothing to worry about."

## Alex Wheeler

But Luke's relief lasted only a moment. Leia was staring blankly through the side port at the receding debris. It had to be hard, seeing everything she'd lost. Luke searched himself for the right words, *something* that would help. But he had nothing.

An awkward silence settled over the cockpit.

Finally, Han cleared his throat. "Princess, we'll be landing in about fifteen minutes. Unless you want some time..."

She jerked her head away from the window and glared at him. "More time? I think we've wasted quite enough time on your flyboy stunts. Let's get to work."

Tobin Elad slipped into his cabin, shut the door behind him, and ceased to exist.

The man who bore his name—when it suited him—sat down in front of his comlink. But he paused before switching it on, taking a moment to soak in the silence of isolation.

It wouldn't be accurate to say he enjoyed the solitude.

The man didn't *enjoy* anything. Nothing made him *happy* or *sad* or *angry*. Emotions were for the weak, for the living. And despite the fact that his heart pumped blood and his lungs filtered air, the man was as dead and empty on the inside as a corpse.

The Commander had seen to that.

He opened a secure channel to the Imperial Center. Almost instantly, Commander Rezi Soresh's face appeared on the screen.

"X-7, report," he ordered.

The Commander had stripped away everything that had once been his life, every face, every name, every memory that had marked him as an individual being. The Commander had emptied him out, and given him only two things in return.

One, a name: X-7. A number, like a droid. Fitting for a creature that lived and breathed only to serve his master's orders. For that was the second thing he'd been given.

Desire. To serve the Commander's every whim. Nothing more.



Never anything less.

"The *Millennium Falcon* is ferrying Leia to Delaya, in the Alderaan system," X-7 reported in his true voice, blank and toneless. Tobin Elad, the man he was pretending to be, spoke in a dry voice that carried hints of his tragic past. The voice, like the words, had been carefully crafted to gain Leia's trust. But the voice, like the words, like the man, was an act. "The Delayan government has agreed to host her without notifying the Empire of her presence."

"A mistake," the Commander said, his hologram snapping into view, "but a useful one. And why has she come?"

"Delaya has become a gathering point for Alderaanians who were offworld at the time of the attack. Officially, Leia is here as their leader. She will offer help to the refugees and pay tribute to the memory of the dead."

"And unofficially?" the Commander prompted.

"She plans to recruit as many refugees as she can for the Rebel cause."

"Good," the Commander said. A ghost of a smile crossed his narrow, pinched face. "This we can use. And your mission?"

"I am closing in on a target. Leia trusts me. They all do. It's only a matter of time before they reveal the name of the pilot who destroyed the Death Star."

The Commander's smile grew wider. "And once we have confirmation?"

"The target will be eliminated," X-7 said. "If and when the Commander wills it."

"You are in a position to do so, when the time comes?" the Commander asked. "Without getting caught?"

Without intending to, X-7 allowed a hint of Tobin Elad's cocky certainty to creep into his voice. "With all due respect, sir, ferreting out the pilot's name will require some finesse. Killing him? That's the easy part."

## Chapter Four

**D**elaya may have looked blue from a distance, but up close, it was nothing but gray. Leilani, its capital city, was packed with faceless duracrete factories puffing black smoke into the smog. Alderaan had long ago exported its manufacturing facilities to Delaya, and the centuries had taken their toll. Landspeeders clogged the narrow streets, creeping past rows of half-constructed buildings. Durasteel scaffolding flanked their exteriors, but the construction equipment sat abandoned.

“New factories,” General Carlist Rieekan said, as he drove deeper into the city toward their lodgings. He had collected Leia from the spaceport; the others were following behind in a second landspeeder. Leia had wanted some time to talk to the general in private. “Or, they were supposed to be. There’s no need for them now.”

The Rebel General had been on a Delayan transmission station when Alderaan was destroyed, and had spent the last several weeks assisting refugee efforts around the sector. Tens of thousands of Alderaanians had been off planet when the Death Star struck. They had kept their lives—but lost everything else. “The Delayan economy has been troubled for years. But now?

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The planet generates most of its income from exporting goods to Alderaan. Without Alderaan..."

"No demand for goods," Leia finished for him.

"And no need for factories or workers to produce them," General Rieekan added, as they drove past a sidewalk crowded with humans and aliens. Leia spotted a Rodian, a Besalisk, three Bothans, and a cluster of white-tufted Ryn. They waited in a line that stretched around the block. "These stragglers came from all over the galaxy, looking for work. Now they have to rely on the government to feed and clothe them—or find another planet."

"Is it like this all over?" Leia asked. The General had spent much of the last couple weeks in other parts of Delaya, visiting refugees across the globe.

He nodded. "Alderaan's tragedy is borne by Delaya as well."

"All the more reason to be grateful to them for taking in the refugees," Leia said.

General Rieekan didn't respond.

"General?" she asked. He was a man who chose his words carefully, but when he did speak, it was always worth hearing.

"I don't want to influence you."

She smiled. "I can assure you, general, no one has ever accused me of being easily influenced."

The general sighed. "There are those here who feel their planet's resources should be reserved for Delayans. Prime Minister Manaa and his deputy, Var Lyonn, have sworn their willingness to help the refugees," he said.

"But?" she prompted him.

"It's just a bad feeling I have," he admitted. "Manaa's men follow me everywhere, and my interactions with the refugees are carefully supervised." He glanced out the window, nodding at a silver landspeeder off to their right. "Even now, they're following us. I've been told it's for security purposes."

"You suspect otherwise."

The general pulled up in front of a tall gray building and brought the landspeeder to a stop. The sign read *Delayan*

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*Whisperpines Hotel*, though there were no whisperpines—or any other tree—in sight. Leia would have preferred more modest accommodations, but the Delayan government had insisted on giving her the royal treatment. It seemed ungrateful to object. Especially since she was counting on them to keep this visit a secret from the Empire.

“I do,” he said. “Perhaps I should have spent less time traveling. If I had looked deeper into the situation in Leilani...”

“You’ve done all you can and more,” she assured him. “And on behalf of the people of Alderaan, I thank you for your efforts.”

“My efforts.” He shook his head and pressed his fingers to his temples. “Your Highness, when the Death Star approached, I heard the distress cries from the transmission station—and I did nothing.”

“There was nothing you could have done,” Leia assured him. “There would have been no time to evacuate the planet, and if you had acted, you could have revealed Alderaan’s connections to the Alliance. You had no way of knowing what the Empire was about to do.”

*Unlike me*, she thought. *I knew exactly what was going to happen. I just couldn’t stop it.*

“You are not to blame,” she said firmly. “For any of this.”

He inclined his head toward her slightly, acknowledging her words, if not agreeing with them.

As they climbed out of the landspeeder, a young man approached, running his hands nervously through his spiky black hair. The General smiled and waved him over. “Leia, meet Kiro Chen,” he said. “He’s been an invaluable help to the cause these last few weeks.”

Leia looked warily at the stranger. “When you say ‘the cause,’ you mean...”

“He knows your true purpose here,” General Rieekan explained. “He came to me as a representative of the survivors, hoping for a way to serve the Alliance.”

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Kiro gave Leia a firm handshake. "It doesn't make sense to talk about 'survivors' as a single group," he explained. "There are too many of us. Though it's only been a short time, different groups have formed—communities, really. Each with their own unofficial leaders."

"Like you?" Leia asked.

Kiro chuckled. "I'm no leader. I just pay attention. I know things. Like the fact that the Rebel Alliance is our greatest hope. If we want to stop another Alderaan..."

Leia winced. "It pains me that our planet's very name has come to stand for destruction and death," she said softly.

"Not all it stands for, Your Highness." Kiro smiled sadly. "You'll see to that."

"Not me," Leia said. "The Alliance."

The general nodded. "Exactly. Kiro is based here in Leilani, and he's managed to put together a coalition of survivors who might be willing to assist the Rebel efforts."

"They're hesitant," Kiro admitted. "After...what happened, they have good cause to be terrified of the Empire."

"All the more reason to fight," Leia said.

Kiro nodded. "I agree. And now that you're here, I know they'll commit. They...*we*—" he reddened— "have always drawn strength from your resolve."

As a princess and Imperial Senator, Leia had grown quite skillful at accepting compliments. But this one touched her more deeply than most. "On behalf of the Rebel Alliance, I thank you for all you've done," she told him, aware she sounded overly formal. "I look forward to working together."

"I've been called for an operation in the Orus Sector," General Rieekan said. "And—"

"Can we have a moment, please?" Leia asked Kiro. He may have been one of her people, and General Rieekan may have trusted him, but he was still a stranger.

He backed away, leaving Leia and the general to speak privately.

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“If you need me here, Your Highness, of course I’ll stay.”

Leia shook her head. “Go ahead. The Rebellion needs you more than I do.”

“Just watch yourself,” he warned her. “Minister Manaa may be the official head of the government, but his deputy, Var Lyonn, holds the true power. And the man is not to be trusted.”

“Few are,” Leia pointed out. “It’s why the Rebel Alliance is lucky to have men like you.”

“And like your father,” he said quietly. “I grieve your loss.”

Leia looked down. “It’s a loss felt by all,” she said brusquely. “And I intend to make sure we never suffer another one like it.”

Leilani was corroded with rust, its air fouled with chemicals and its skies black with smoke. But when they arrived at the housing development that had been erected for Alderaan survivors, Leia was surprised to find everything shiny and new. There were even a few trees poking up between the small homes.

After introducing her to the prime minister and his deputy, General Rieekan had returned to the spaceport. At Leia’s request, the government officials had brought her to see the accommodations that had been made for her people. Though she had wanted to go alone, Luke had insisted on coming along. He said he was curious, but she knew he just didn’t want her to be alone. It infuriated her, the way everyone was treating her like she was some fragile piece of transparisteel, about to shatter into a million pieces. Yes, she’d lost everything—but she certainly wasn’t the only one.

“There are two hundred residents in the T’iil Blossom Homes,” Deputy Minister Var Lyonn said, proudly showing off the facilities. His gray shimmersilk robe, the same color as his thinning hair, brushed against the ground as he walked. “Families who were off planet on vacation, businessmen, students on school trips—every survivor has a different story, though of course they all end in the same tragic way. It’s been our honor as Delayans to offer a safe and happy refuge.”

Leia smiled at the groups of survivors picnicking in a ragged patch of grass. It reminded her of lazy afternoons on the grounds of the palace, snacking on Memily's custard bread while she watched the gingerbells bloom. The memory was as welcome as it was painful.

"We have established developments like this all across the city," Var Lyonn said. His smile didn't quite reach his eyes. Prime Minister Gresh Manaa, who hadn't spoken since he'd first introduced himself, nodded eagerly. He was shorter and rounder than his deputy, with a fringe of gray hair ringing his bulging chin. His wide eyes made him seem perpetually surprised. He walked a few feet behind Var Lyonn, like a child trailing his minder.

They rounded a hedge to discover a small boy huddled on the ground. When he spotted them, he wiped the tears from his eyes with two balled fists. "I'm not crying," he said defiantly.

"I can see that," Leia assured him. "Where are your parents?"

"In building seven," he said. "I got lost."

"Princess, we should really keep moving," Var Lyonn said. "We have much to see."

Leia ignored him. "Would you like help finding your parents?" she asked the child.

The boy burst into tears.

Var Lyonn grunted with impatience. "Your Highness, surely we all have more pressing matters to attend to than *baby-sitting*."

"Then you attend to them," Leia said, with as much politeness as she could muster. "*I'm* getting this child back to his family."

"As I've already explained, it's not safe for you to wander around on your own. If you insist, we can all—"

"You go," Luke said, catching her eye. "I remember passing building seven on our way in. It's just across the park."

"Excellent," Var Lyonn said brusquely, already walking away. "Rejoin us when you can." Leia nodded at Luke, and followed behind the deputy minister. It was clear he didn't want her out of

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his sight. At least this way, Luke would have a chance to do some exploring on his own.

"We've done what we can with the funds we have," Lyonn said, as they continued to stroll across the grounds, "but of course, the more we have, the more we can help." A number of wealthy former residents of Alderaan had donated funds to Delaya, to help them tend to the survivors. Although the Organa fortune had been pledged to the Rebellion, Leia knew of many who would donate funds at her request.

They wandered through narrow, tree-lined paths dotted with small buildings. There was a cultural center, a cafeteria, even a school. It looked like a comfortable place to live—but Leia suspected that for its residents, it would never be home.

"Time to go," Var Lyonn said, after they'd been there for less than an hour. "I don't know where your associate has wandered off to, but we'll collect him on our way out."

"Already?" She'd spoken to only a few of the survivors, all quick to thank the Delayan officials for giving them a new home. They seemed reluctant to say anything more. "You go. I can find my own way back."

"That would be ill advised," Lyonn said. "You're a very public figure—with a lot of enemies."

"I'm not concerned."

Lyonn and Manaa shared a look. "I'm afraid we don't have that luxury," Lyonn said, his tone civil but firm. "If something were to happen to you here, we would never forgive ourselves." He paused. "Of course you'll want us to take every precaution against having the Empire learn of your presence here."

It was only his cold smile that made it sound like a threat.

"I should probably return to the hotel anyway," Leia said gracefully. "I do need to prepare for tomorrow."

This was partly true. She had agreed to officiate at a large memorial ceremony. Hundreds of people would attend, all expecting her words to heal their wounds. She couldn't even heal her own.



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But that wasn't why she agreed to return to the hotel. General Rieekan had been right: Manaa and Lyonn were hiding something. Picking a fight wouldn't be the best way to find out what it was. That was Han's way. Shoot first, ask questions never. Leia was more patient—but no less determined.

"You sure this is the right place?" Luke asked. Once they'd found building seven, the small boy had led him around to a playground in the back, claiming his parents would be waiting for him. But there was no one there. The boy looked more terrified than ever.

"Don't worry," Luke said. "We'll find your parents. They're probably out looking for you right at this moment."

"I didn't want to do it," the boy said.

"Do what?" Luke asked in confusion—and then rough hands grabbed him from behind, twisting his hands behind his back. A bag dropped over his head. Luke kicked out blindly, and his foot slammed hard into someone's stomach. There was a loud grunt, and his legs were kicked out from beneath him. He dropped to the ground, his head slamming into the duracrete.

"Careful, don't hurt him!" someone snapped.

Luke was scooped up and tossed onto a hard surface. There was a loud bang just over his head, like a lid being slammed shut. An engine rumbled, and the floor vibrated beneath him. It looked like he was going for a ride.

Like it or not.

## Chapter Five

Luke strained against the wrist binders. They wouldn't give. He twisted his arms toward his right hip, straining his fingers toward his belt. The men had taken his blaster—but they hadn't thought to search for other weapons. If he could just reach the hilt of his lightsaber...

*There!*

Luke was about to activate the blade, when he hesitated. It wasn't just the close quarters—he knew he might miss the binders and slice off a limb—it was a feeling, almost an inner voice, urging him to stop.

*Have patience. Watch. Wait.*

It was the kind of thing Ben might have said—but this wasn't Ben's voice. It came from somewhere deep inside of him. It was less a voice than a certainty that he should allow events to play themselves out.

*Is it the Force?* Luke wondered.

Or was it just his own fear?

Either way, Luke decided to listen. He still had his lightsaber. When the time came to use it, he would be ready. Until then, he would have patience. Watch.

Wait.

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The lid swung open. Luke squinted into the light. Two figures stood over him, silhouetted by the sun, their faces hidden in shadow.

“We don’t want to hurt you,” the taller one said.

“And we won’t—if you come quietly,” added the other. “If you don’t...” He left the threat unspoken.

“Where are we?” Luke asked.

Instead of answering, they yanked him out of the speeder, holding him upright as his legs buckled. Though his muscles quickly recovered, he let himself sag as they half-pushed, half-dragged him down the narrow path.

Let them believe he was weak.

“You’re making a mistake,” Luke warned, as they approached a massive building of faceless gray ferrocrete. Several similar structures stood on either side. Luke suspected they’d brought him to the warehouse district. But why? “If you tell me what you want, maybe we can work something out.”

“We got what we wanted,” the shorter man growled. “You.”

Once again, Luke considered going for his lightsaber. Here, the odds were one against two. Not great, since the two had blasters and all he had was a lightsaber he could barely use.

*Watch.*

*Wait.*

It defied sense, but Luke trusted his instincts. Just as Ben had instructed him.

The men shoved him into the building. Off balance, he stumbled through the door, toppling forward. They caught him just before he hit the ground and jerked him upright. Luke gasped.

It was a warehouse, as he’d guessed. But the only thing stored in this warehouse were people.

People everywhere—hundreds of them, perhaps a thousand. Sprawled on thin mats, leaning against the walls, sickly and pale. Huddled under threadbare blankets, fighting over foil-wrapped protein supplements. The building was hundreds of meters wide

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and at least six stories high, with landings on each level circling a wide open central area. The thick air stunk of rotting bantha meat.

“What is this place?” Luke whispered, forcing himself not to turn away from all the gaunt, hopeless faces.

“New Alderaan,” one of his captors said bitterly. “Home sweet home.”

“You can sit.”

Luke’s captors had shoved him into a small makeshift enclosure, bounded by two hanging sheets and a few thin sheets of plasteel propped against each other. The man facing him had a round face dusted by a reddish gold beard. Laugh lines framed his wide mouth, but the eyes beneath the bushy blond eyebrows shone with sorrow. “I said, *sit*.”

When Luke didn’t move, his captors each put a hand on one of his shoulders, and forced him to the ground. He sat awkwardly, his arms still pinned behind him.

The bearded man glanced at the others. “Leave us.”

The short, stocky one frowned. “Nahj, it’s not safe.”

The seated man gave him a thin smile. “I hardly think he poses much of a threat. And—” He gave Luke a pointed look. “He knows you’ll be standing just outside, blasters at the ready. He’s no fool. Are you?”

Luke said nothing.

The men nodded, and slipped out of the lean-to.

“You can call me J’er Nahj,” the bearded man said, once they were alone. “And you are?”

Luke didn’t answer.

“You’re wondering why they brought you here,” Nahj said.

“They did it because you told them to,” Luke guessed.

“Not exactly.” He sighed. “Not you.”

Luke’s eyes widened. He should have realized. “You were trying to kidnap *Leia*?” A flush of anger rose in him, and he readied himself to go for his lightsaber.

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J'er Nahj looked abashed. "I'm not a bad man, you know. I'm hardly in the business of kidnapping."

"Then what kind of business are you in?"

"Before?" J'er Nahj raised his eyebrows. "I sold durasteel fixtures for 'freshers. You wanted a new sink or a fancy shower? I was your man. Outfitted 'freshers all over the sector. Before. Now ask me, 'Before what?' "

"I don't have to," Luke said. He still didn't understand why he was here, but it was painfully obvious why the rest of them were. "*Before* Alderaan. You're all survivors, aren't you?"

J'er Nahj barked out a harsh laugh. "Survivors? Didn't you hear? There were no survivors. An entire planet, gone in an instant. There were those of us who were off-planet, yes. Those of us who were at a 'fresher convention on Delaya while our wives were vaporized in the middle of cooking a pot of L'lahsh, our children blown to bits while running through the meadow picking t'uil blossoms. There were those of us who escaped," he said fiercely. "But make no mistake. None of us *survived*."

## Chapter Six

I'm sorry," Luke said. "But the Delayan government had offered to help you. You don't need—"

"Who do you think shoved us into this miserable hole?" Nahj cut in angrily. "And the thousand in the warehouse next to this one? The Delayan government cares nothing for us. Whatever lies they may tell your princess."

"She's *your* princess," Luke said quietly.

"Then why does she let us suffer like this, while she dines with the Delayan space-slugs who left us here?"

"Because she doesn't *know*," Luke insisted.

"She had her chance to find out," Nahj snapped. "I requested an audience as soon as I found out she was coming. Her response made her feelings perfectly clear: Meeting with people like us is beneath her."

"But we never even got your request!" Luke protested, his thoughts spinning. The Delayan officials must have intercepted Nahj's message. Of course: They were trying to keep Leia from finding out about this place. "You've been lied to—but so have we."

"Politicians believe what they want to believe," Nahj scoffed. "The Delayans have only opened their planet to us so they can

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get their hands on what's left of Alderaan's wealth. Your Princess Leia will only acknowledge the truth if we force her to see it."

"Except that you ended up with the wrong hostage," Luke pointed out. "So what are you supposed to do now?"

"True, we don't have the princess," Nahj admitted. "But perhaps we have something she wants."

"Me?"

"It's an honest trade. She comes to us, she looks suffering in the face without turning away—and she gets you back, unharmed. If she doesn't care about you enough to come..."

"You'd...what?" Luke asked, eyeing the plasteel separating him from the men with blasters. "Kill me?"

Nahj winced.

"I don't think so," Luke said. "The people of Alderaan love peace. They still love it. And I think, despite all this, you're a peaceful man."

"Alderaan *was* a peaceful planet," a woman's voice said from behind Luke. "Until the princess and her father dragged it into war. Now we bear the consequences of *her* rash actions. It seems only right she should bear some of her own."

"Halle, please," Nahj said in a stony voice.

Luke twisted around to see a woman with short crimson hair, her mouth an angry red slash across her face. She was only a couple years older than Luke. "I didn't come here to fight," she said, looking like she regretted that fact. "Shell's outside. He wanted me to bring him over, to apologize."

Nahj nodded his permission.

"Shell!" she called out. "He says okay. You can come in."

Nothing happened. "One second," Halle said, slipping through an opening in the sheet.

"You can do it," Luke heard a man say. "It'll only be hard until you get the first word out—then, easy as skinning a nerf."

"He doesn't have to if he doesn't want to," Halle snapped.

"I want to," a young boy's voice said. A familiar voice.

"Good boy," the man said.

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"You'll make him soft," Halle complained.

"No softer than you, deep down," the man said. "Even if you won't admit it." There was a long silence. When Halle reappeared, her cheeks were glowing, and her fingers strayed across her lips. But the smile disappeared as soon as she caught Luke watching her. "This is Shell," she said, slinging an arm around a young boy with brown hair and a familiar frown. "I believe you two know each other."

Luke still couldn't believe they'd used a child as bait.

"Sorry I lied to you," the boy said. He looked much less helpless than he had at the T'ril Blossom Homes, but no less miserable. "They weren't gonna hurt you or anything. They said it was the right thing to do."

"Lying is never the right thing to do," Luke said.

Halle scowled. "The kid's sorry," she spat out. "The *least* you can do is forgive him."

"I do forgive him," Luke shot back. "He's a child. What's your excuse?"

"Shell, go outside," Halle said tightly. "I'll be there in a minute."

"Halle..." Nahj's voice held a warning. "Maybe you should go, too."

"Maybe you should get *on* with things," Halle said.

"You don't have to do this," Luke told them. "Let me go, and I'll bring her to you myself. As soon as Leia sees all this, she'll want to help."

"Let you go?" Halle grimaced. "So you can run back to your princess and have us all arrested?"

"Leia will want to help," Luke promised. "Do you really want to teach your son that blackmail and kidnapping is the right way to fix things?"

"My *son*?"

"Shell is no one's son," Nahj said quietly. "His family was murdered on Alderaan. He was here visiting his grandmother,



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but the shock of the attack was too much for her and...He's on his own now. We all look after him. Him and the others."

An orphan.

Luke saw the smoking remains of the moisture farm on Tatooine, Aunt Beru and Uncle Owen's skeletons smoldering in the ruins.

Creating orphans was the Empire's specialty.

"I will help, if you let me," Luke said. "But this is not the way."

Nahj tightened his lips and looked away. Halle shook her head in disgust and rubbed a hand across her eyes.

Their gaze was only off him for a moment, but it was enough. Time seemed to draw itself out, slowing to a crawl. Luke twisted his arms around, grasping the hilt of his lightsaber. He activated the blade and, in one smooth, swift chop, sliced through the cords binding his wrists. He leapt to his feet, blade outstretched, its tip centimeters away from J'er Nahj's throat.

"Don't," Nahj said quietly. Luke realized he was speaking to Halle, who was about to lunge at him, despite the fact that she was unarmed.

"One scream," Halle warned Luke in a low voice, "and you're facing ten men with blasters."

"One centimeter," Luke said, glancing toward the lightsaber blade. "Are your men with blasters faster than my blade?" He had no intention of hurting Nahj, or any of them. But Halle had to believe he would.

Nahj shook his head. "We agreed no violence," he said, remarkably calm. He turned to Luke. "So what now?"

"Now?" Luke hesitated—then deactivated the lightsaber. Nahj emitted a barely noticeable sigh as the blue beam disappeared. "Now I contact Leia, and we try to find a way to help your people. Just as I said I would." He held out his hand. "One of your men took my comlink."

"Merely a precaution." Nahj pulled out his own comlink out from beneath his cloak and handed it to Luke. "Use mine."

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“J’er!” Halle snapped. “If he calls in the authorities...”

Nahj ignored her. “Please,” he told Luke. “If our methods were misguided, you must believe our motives were pure. We knew the princess would only be on Delaya for a short time, and that the government would do anything they could to prevent her from learning about our fate. We were desperate. We *are* desperate.”

Luke flicked on the comlink.

“Luke!” Leia sounded relieved. “We’ve been looking everywhere for you! What happened? Is everything all right?”

Luke paused, meeting Nahj’s searching gaze. Leia would be outraged if she learned the truth. She would never trust J’er Nahj—and that might get in the way of helping his people.

On the other hand, it felt wrong to lie to her.

*What do I do?* he asked silently, hoping that the mysterious certainty he’d felt earlier would return. But the Force, if that’s what it had been, was silent. He was on his own.

“Everything’s fine,” he said steadily. “I just...decided to do a little exploring.”

J’er Nahj breathed out the same quiet sigh he had when Luke pulled the lightsaber from his throat. Halle’s scowl didn’t fade.

“Are you on your way back?” Leia asked, still sounding anxious.

“Actually, I think you should join me here,” Luke told her. “There’s something you need to see.”

## Chapter Seven

You sure he didn't happen to mention what he was *doing* all the way out here?" Han asked, slogging through the muddy streets. If it *was* mud. It smelled more like raw sewage.

Leia shook her head. "Just said it was important that we come."

Han didn't have anything against the idea of coming to the rescue. Obviously the kid had gotten himself into some kind of trouble, as usual. Han just wished he'd found trouble a little closer to home.

Back at the hotel, they had autovalets, a greenputt course, fresh-squeezed juma juice, and bloody nerf steak—all paid in full by the Delayan government. Whereas here, on the outer edge of the city, all they had were abandoned construction sites, mounds of festering garbage, and sewage. Scrawny rodents with patches of greenish-yellow fur scampered in the gutters, and bludflies swarmed overhead. Han was sure he'd caught a glimpse of a borrat burrowing under a nearby building, at least two meters from tusk to tail. Not that Han had anything against life on the shady side of town—but a little luxury every once in a while never hurt.

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The pubtrans flitter didn't even extend to this neighborhood, and the driver they'd hired had refused to drive them more than halfway. "You won't find anyone willing to take you to that part of town," he'd warned them. "You'd have to be crazy."

*More like stubborn*, Han thought, glancing at the princess. She'd just shrugged and insisted they walk. He didn't even know why he was still *on* this planet. *One more day*, he told himself. *Then I'm out*.

Chewbacca issued a low, guttural growl. The Wookiee was crankier than usual.

"You *know* why you couldn't be the one to stay behind," Han said. "If that deputy minister or his cronies try to track down the princess, *someone* needs to be there and talk 'em out of it. And something tells me Elad will do the job better than two droids and a Wookiee."

They hadn't been forbidden from leaving the hotel—not exactly. But that was because they hadn't asked. They'd snuck out the window, leaving Elad and the droids behind to explain things if it was discovered they were gone.

Chewbacca growled again.

"Because I don't want them here, bugging me!" Han said. "The little one's okay, but that protocol droid..." He shook his head. "Let's just say the less time I spend with him, the less chance he has of getting turned into a scrap-pile."

The Wookiee let out a mournful groan.

"Not so bad?" Han exclaimed. "Easy for you to say. The rustbucket's terrified of you. Has some crazy idea you're going to rip off his arms."

Chewbacca barked out a reply.

"Well, okay, so I *am* the one who gave him that idea. I just wanted him to shut his mouth for five seconds. Can you blame me?" Han swore under his breath as his boot squished into something soft and pungent. It looked like it had once been alive—but he didn't look too close.

"Han," Leia said quietly.

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"I know, I know." Han scowled down at his boot, trying to scrape off the worst of it. "The bag of bolts comes in handy sometimes. *Sometimes.*"

"No, Han. Look!"

Three men—*No*, he realized, *not men. Boys*—stood before them, blocking the narrow road. They stood mutely with their hands raised, palms up.

"What do you think they want?" Leia murmured. "Money?"

Han shot her a sharp look. Every once in a while, she said something that reminded him of the distance between them. It wasn't the kind you could cross in a ship. "Well, I doubt they're begging for the fun of it, Your Highness."

Without hesitating, Leia pulled out a pouch of credits, hurrying toward the boys. Something familiar about the setup clicked in Han's brain. "Leia, wait—"

Too late.

As she dropped a handful of credits into the tallest boy's outstretched hands, he snatched her wrist and twisted it behind her back. A rusted vibroblade appeared in his other hand. He held it to her throat.

"You kids crazy?" Han shouted. "You really want to face off against a *Wookiee*?"

To help get the point across, Chewbacca shook his furry fists in the air, roaring.

The other two kids looked nervous, but the one in charge didn't flinch. "Just give us all your credits and we'll leave you alone."

"And what makes you so sure we'll leave *you* alone?" Han shot back, his fingers twitching toward his blaster. Not that he'd shoot at a bunch of kids. But if he could scare them, or cause some kind of distraction...

He shook his head, tempted to laugh. Served him right, falling for such a worn-out stunt. He'd pulled it on more than a few clueless oldies himself back when he was a kid.

Not that he'd ever been dumb enough to attack a *Wookiee*.

## Alex Wheeler

“Do you know who I *am*?” Leia asked in an icy voice. “Tm...”

“Not the kind of gal who scares easy,” Han said quickly. Talk about not having a clue. Did she really think it would *help* to tell them she was a princess? A *rich* princess? “And neither is my friend here.”

Chewbacca roared again, louder this time.

“So how ’bout you put down the knife—”

“How bout *you* stop wasting my time, old man,” the kid snarled, “and hand over the credits.”

“*Old man*?” Han took a step forward. He didn’t need a blaster. Not to handle this punk. Chewbacca growled. “No thanks, buddy,” Han said. “This one’s *all mine*.”

Han didn’t hear the footsteps behind him, and he didn’t hear the blaster fire. He just saw the laser bolt slam into the kid’s blade, centimeters from Leia’s neck. It was a clean hit—the blade went flying. The kid backed away, examining his hand like he couldn’t believe it was still in one piece.

Han couldn’t believe it either. It was one of the cleanest shots he’d ever seen. He whirled around. A plump old man stood behind him, his jaunty grin mostly covered by a thick, graying beard. Han scoured the streets, convinced *this* couldn’t be the guy who’d fired the shot. But there was no one else around.

And the old guy was holding a smoking blaster. “Thought we agreed you kids weren’t going to do this anymore!” he called out.

The lead kid reddened and retrieved his blade, shoving it into his back pocket. “Wasn’t planning to,” the kid said sullenly. “Not my fault they showed up in this neighborhood. They were asking for it.”

“Come on, Mazi,” the man said sternly. “Try it again and the deal’s off.”

“Yeah. Fine.” He glared at Han. “But I could’ve taken you, old man. No question.” He nodded to his friends and, without a word, they slipped away into the darkness.”

## STAR WARS: Hostage

Han grinned. The kid had spunk, you had to give him that. “Friends of yours?” he asked the old man.

“I pay them to run errands for me, do odd jobs, and the like, as long as they promise to stay out of trouble. That’s the deal.” He was talking to Han—but all the while, he was staring at Leia.

She glared back. “You’re alive,” she said flatly.

The man looked down at himself, as if examining the evidence. “So it would seem.”

Leia had never expected to see him again.

“Princess.” He took a step toward her, his arms outstretched, then hesitated and dropped them to his sides. “I’d heard you were here.”

“And I—” Leia stopped, overwhelmed by a swirl of conflicting emotions. “I thought you were still on Alderaan.”

He smiled gently. “I had some business on Delaya. I arrived here the day before the attack.”

“I’m glad,” she said flatly.

“This guy a friend of yours, Highness?” Han said.

“No.” The word came automatically.

“Fess Ilee,” he said, shaking hands with Han and nodding toward Chewbacca. “I am a friend of Bail Organa’s.”

“He *was* a friend to my father,” Leia clarified. “But my father is dead.”

“I am and always will be his friend,” Fess said steadily.

He was a man of soft, rounded edges, with a belly bulging over his belt and the makings of a double chin. His fingers were stubby, his nose bulbous, and his mind seemed to be as fuzzy as the back of his neck. Leia had never been sure of his age—most of the time, he looked far older than her father, weathered and weak. But there had been moments when, out of the corner of her eye, she caught him moving with a surprising grace, the years falling away from his suddenly youthful face.

He lacked every quality her father had possessed: nobility, courage, wisdom. Though he called himself a botanist, his main

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skill seemed to be currying favor. He grinned and nodded with greasy ease, laughing heartily at the weakest joke, complimenting the gaudiest gown. And yet Bail Organa had spoken of him privately with respect.

“How are you?” Fess asked.

“How do you think?” Leia snapped. Then she steadied herself. As a princess and a Senator she’d grown adept at dealing gracefully with her enemies. And Fess wasn’t an enemy, he was just a harmless parasite. “I’m fine,” she said, more politely. “Thank you for helping us with those boys.”

Fess shook his head. “I can’t stand to see children forced to make a life for themselves on the streets.”

He didn’t sound like the Fess she remembered—but then, they were all different now.

“We should be going,” Leia said.

“I’ll come along,” Fess suggested. “It’s dangerous out here alone.”

“I’m hardly alone,” she said, glancing at Chewbacca, who towered over the humans by several feet. The Wookiee rumbled in agreement.

“I know this city,” Fess argued. “I can be of assistance. Perhaps more than you know.”

Han snorted. “What is it with you old men and your delusions of grandeur?” he muttered.

“Excuse me?”

“You just reminded me of someone else who thought we could use his help,” Han said. “Didn’t end so well for him.”

“Perhaps he lacked my skill set,” Fess said mildly. “But—as you wish.”

As they said their good-byes, Leia wondered if she would ever see him again, and if she cared.

She needn’t have bothered. They were only a few blocks away when Han snuck a glance over his shoulder. “That’s one stubborn old man.”



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Leia stopped short. "He's following us?" She whirled around, but the streets were empty.

"Ducks into an alley every time I look back," Han said. "Sneaky fellow, but not sneaky enough. Guess he doesn't know who he's dealing with, does he, Chewie?"

The Wookiee barked a yes.

"You want me to run him off?" Han asked.

Leia shook her head, and began walking again. "If he wants to follow us so badly, let him."

From everything she knew about Fess, she suspected his offers of assistance were as empty as his head. Still, there was a strange reassurance in knowing he was following her. As if some childish, irrational part of her believed what her father had once told her: that no harm would come to her as long as Fess Ilee was alive.

## Chapter Eight

*Fesssss,*” she hisses, laughing at the sound of it, wet and slimy like a Kowakian monkey-lizard. And that is what he looks like, she decides, with his greasy smile and those tufts of hair growing out of his big ears. “Fess the monkey-lizard.”

“Shhh!” Winter urges her. “They’ll hear us.”

“Relax,” Leia tells her best friend. “No one will find us here.” They have hidden themselves at the edge of the grand ballroom, tucked behind a swooping marble staircase. Leia is supposed to be in the center of the room, swinging across the dance floor in a long ballgown of shimmersilk.

But that was before she and Winter hid a giant wooly moth in the minister of agriculture’s desk drawer. He deserved it—but Leia’s father didn’t see it that way. (Especially after the wooly moth chewed through a sheet of flimsiplast containing the budget for the whole next year.) Now she is banned from attending the party—but Leia has decided that doesn’t mean she can’t watch.

It’s more fun here, anyway. They have a pile of scavenged food, from t’uil seed cake to spiced grazer loaf. And from where they sit, they can easily hear all the silly people trying to impress her father. Leia is only eight years old, but she knows that grinning and nodding and agreeing with everything he says isn’t the way to do it.

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*They nibble on sticks of sweetened Oro bark and watch Groos Corado try to persuade Tasha Moore to dance. They giggle as brothers Cassio and Pol Prentiss argue about which of them cheats at greenputt. But worst of all is Fess Ilee. Leia has never heard anyone talk so much and say so little. No matter how many words spill out of his mouth, they all have the same meaning: Yes, you're right.*

*She glares at him—then gasps, as he snivels his head toward her hiding place. His gaze travels over the heads of the crowd and locks onto her. She knows she is totally hidden—but she can't shake off the feeling that he knows she is there.*

*"I'm bored," she whispers to Winter. "Let's get out of here."*

*But when she slips out of her hiding place, she walks right into her father. And he is not happy.*

*He doesn't yell. He simply banishes her to her room. Tomorrow, she is supposed to go with Winter to the gingerbell blossom festival, but now, according to her father, that is not going to happen.*

*That's what he thinks.*

*Leia waits until the house falls asleep. Then she opens her bedroom window and climbs onto the sill. Balancing carefully on the frame, she examines her options. There is a low hanging tree branch, its tip just out of reach. Even if she stretches as far as she can, it won't be enough. But if she jumps, she will be able to grab it. Unless she misses.*

*She never misses.*

*Leia launches herself at the branch, digging her fingers into the scratchy bark. She dangles for a moment, swinging her feet through the air, proud of her daring. Then, hand over hand, she pulls herself to the trunk and shimmies down to the ground.*

*She runs across the dark and empty palace grounds, laughing into the night air. She is free.*

*The city is different in the dark. The streets are abandoned. She doesn't know where she is going, but she doesn't care.*

*She doesn't hear the footsteps, doesn't notice the shadow following her through the night.*

*She is not afraid.*

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"You sure this is the place?" Han asked, as they arrived at the coordinates Luke had given them. "It's a dump." It was a massive duracrete warehouse, surrounded on all sides by mounds of trash. Much of Leilani seemed broken down and abandoned—but this looked condemned.

Leia glanced over her shoulder, but Fess had disappeared. She double-checked the coordinates. "This is it."

They stepped inside.

And into a nightmare.

*How did this happen?* Leia thought in horror, forcing herself to look into the desperate, hopeless faces of her people. *How could I let this happen?*

Since the destruction of Alderaan, she'd distracted herself with one Rebel mission after another, trying to bury her pain. Trying to forget.

But she'd never intended to forget the people who had been left behind.

"You were right, Manaa and Var Lyonn were hiding something," Luke said, appearing beside her. "This."

The man next to him, young, though his hair was streaked with gray, extended a hand. "J'er Nahj," he introduced himself. "The Delayan government didn't want you to see the reality of our situation, but Luke here thought you'd want to know."

"I ran into Nahj outside of the hotel," Luke said, giving the man an odd look. "He agreed to bring me here so I could see for myself."

"More than seven thousand of us, Your Highness," Nahj said. "That we know of. The lucky ones had credits stored off-planet, or family and friends they could rely on. The less fortunate were taken in by the government, given houses and resources and put on display, to impress people like you. To make sure the money keeps rolling in. But here you see what happens to those with no luck at all. The ones who find themselves alone in the galaxy, everyone they ever knew and everything they ever had destroyed. The ones who can no longer

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afford to feed themselves—or the ones who can no longer muster the will to do it, because they would rather be dead. We're a drain on the Delayan economy. And worse, we're a reminder of unhappiness. It's easier to dump us here and forget about us. Makes it easier for everyone to move on."

Leia clutched his hand. "I promise you this: No one is moving on. Not without you."

Luke swung the landspeeder abruptly to the left, veering around a corner, straight through a lane clogged with traffic. A luxury speeder behind them slammed on its brakes just in time.

"Luke, what are you doing?" Leia asked in alarm.

"I told you not to let the kid drive," Han grumbled.

J'err Nahj had offered them use of a landspeeder to return to the hotel. Luke didn't understand. "If you can afford a landspeeder, then can't you afford—" He broke off, looking around at the conditions in the warehouse, his question obvious.

"I'm not here out of need," Nahj had said. "I'm here because these are my people."

Luke knew he'd just come within meters of crushing Nahj's landspeeder (and its passengers), but it had been worth it. He'd confirmed his suspicions. "We're being followed," he said, glancing over his shoulder at the red SoroSuub X-31. It was keeping its distance, but it had matched every one of Luke's twists and turns.

Luke glanced at Leia, who still seemed a bit shaken up from what she'd seen at the warehouse. "We can contact Var Lyonn and have him waiting at the hotel with reinforcements," he suggested.

"That probably *is* Lyonn," Han argued. "Or one of his men."

"Maybe. Maybe not." With a dangerous smile, Leia narrowed her eyes at the SoroSuub speeder. "Let's find out."

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Luke pushed the landspeeder as fast as it would go, whooshing through the streets of the warehouse district. He took a hairpin curve at full speed, nearly flipping the vehicle on its side. The speeder shot down a back alley, then burst out the other side, nearly slamming into a giant borrrat frozen in the middle of the road, its furry ears twitching as it stared into the oncoming traffic. Veering around it, Luke skidded across the sidewalk and plowed through a detour sign blocking off the entrance to a street crowded with construction equipment. He threaded the landspeeder through a scrum of bulldozers and deactivated construction droids, his teeth rattling as the repulsorlifts bounced over the torn up road.

Still, the red SoroSuub followed. Leia's plan called for them to *look* like they were trying to evade their pursuer, even as they drew him deeper and deeper into the abandoned district. As far as Luke was concerned, her rash "plan" was more like a death wish. It sounded like something *Han* would have come up with. So Luke wasn't just pretending to evade pursuit. He was determined to shake the guy.

Just one problem: Whoever was following them seemed to anticipate Luke's every move.

"Turn in here!" Leia barked, and Luke swung the landspeeder sharply to the right, ducking into a narrow, twisting alley. It dead-ended in a high, durasteel gate with sharp barbs running along the top. "Perfect," Leia said. "Stop."

Luke groaned. *What was so perfect about a dead end?* But he obeyed her command and hit the brakes.

"Remind me of this brilliant plan again, Your Worshipfulness," Han said. "We're going to get out of the landspeeder, wait for this guy, whoever he is, to catch up with us, and—what, exactly?"

"And find out who he is and what he wants," Leia said. "You have a problem with that?"

"Let's see," Han said. "It's risky, it's foolish, it's overconfident—"

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Chewbacca growled, and Han grinned at him. "Because you didn't let me *finish*, you overgrown fuzzball. I was about to say, sounds like my kind of plan."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Luke muttered.

The red SoroSuub pulled into the alley and drew to a stop.

"Got your blaster ready, kid?" Han asked.

Luke nodded. *But I'll only use it if I have to*, he thought, his hand straying to his lightsaber. According to Ben it was more effective than a blaster.

Of course, Ben had known how to use it.

A single figure slipped out of the red speeder, shrouded by the milky twilight. Han jumped out of the speeder, his blaster raised. Chewie followed, his bowcaster at the ready. Luke stayed in the speeder, determined to protect Leia at all costs. The man advanced with his arms out, no weapon drawn. Luke tensed. The man could be offering himself up in peace...or it could be a trap.

Leia groaned and reached for the door. Luke grabbed her wrist. "You promised you'd stay in the speeder until we figured out what was going on."

She shrugged him off. "I *know* what's going on." She pushed past him and climbed out of the speeder. Luke activated his lightsaber and rushed after her. "What are you doing, Fess?" she shouted. "You could have gotten us all killed."

"I need to talk to you," Fess said, approaching. "This seemed the best way."

Luke stepped in front of Leia and activated his lightsaber. "Next time, try a comlink."

The man froze, all color draining from his face.

"It's fine, Luke," Leia said from behind him. "It's just Fess. He's harmless."

"Interesting weapon you have there," Fess said, in a choked voice. "*Luke*, did you say?"

Luke glanced at Leia, ready to take her lead. She sighed, and her shoulders slumped.

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"He's a friend, Luke," Han said. Leia glared at him. "Well, not a friend, exactly," Han added hastily. "But he's no danger to us."

"You want to talk, Fess?" Leia snarled. "Talk."

But Fess wasn't looking at her. His eyes were locked on Luke. He extended a hand and—not knowing what else to do, Luke shook it. A strange current passed between them. Luke jerked his hand away.

*He reminds me of Ben*, Luke thought. But that didn't make any sense. The two men had nothing in common. Obi-Wan Kenobi had been tall and gaunt, dressed in a ragged cloak, his frown hidden by a dense beard, his eyes piercing, Fess was nearly twenty years younger, his soft features rounded by a life of ease and plentiful food, clothed in fine robes, his face frozen in a false smile.

There had been no falseness in Ben. And yet...

*What is it?* Luke thought, frustrated. He didn't know if he was asking himself—or Ben. What is it about this man. This...

"Ferus?" The word popped out of his mouth before he realized what he was saying, as if someone else had spoken it.

Fess took an abrupt step backward, growing even paler.

"Ferus," Luke said again, filled with an inexplicable certainty. The word drifted through his mind like a whisper. He didn't know what it meant, but he somehow knew he was speaking truth.

"No," Fess said, with quiet intensity. "Not anymore."



## Chapter Nine

*Ferus Olin.*

Not his name. Not anymore, not for a long time.

He'd left it behind, the day he arrived in Alderaan's seemingly infinite sea of grass. Created a new life for himself. Not that it was much of a life, tending to the nerfs, wandering the grasslands, trying not to think about everything he'd lost. Trying not to imagine the accusing faces of the dead.

Ry-Gaul.

Solace.

Garen Muln.

And Roan. It was Roan Lands's face that he saw when he woke, Roan's voice he heard when he drifted off to sleep.

Not that he slept much.

He was hiding, he knew that. He'd tried fighting the Empire, tried fighting Darth Vader—and one bad decision after another had led here. To a life of isolation, a life that wasn't a life, but a mission.

Protect Leia.

Living like a hermit may have worked for Obi-Wan, stranded on a dusty desert planet in the middle of nowhere. But Alderaan was a world of life and crowds, swirling with social networks. A

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world of meaningful connections. Which might have appealed to him once, back when he was Ferus Olin—former Jedi, former Bellassan security expert, former resistance fighter, former enemy of the Empire.

Now he was just *former*. He had made himself invisible, and invisible men can form no connection.

Invisible men can, however, blend in. Gradually, Ferus gave up his life in the grasslands for a new life in the city. Took on a new identity. *Fess*, a repugnant name for a repugnant man. It was the only way to stay close to Leia. Disappearing in plain sight meant becoming what he hated most. A man who said nothing that mattered. A man who held no opinions except the opinions of whoever he was speaking to. A man who lived his life on the surface, so empty of purpose and thought, so inconsequential that no one could suspect he had anything to hide.

He became a mirror, reflecting back what people wanted to see and hear, keeping his true self hidden so deeply he'd almost forgotten where to find it. And now *Luke Skywalker*, of all people, had found it for him. Had somehow found *him*.

The Force was strong in Luke, but wild, like an untamed animal. And yet he had the lightsaber—Anakin Skywalker's lightsaber. Did he know the truth of its origin? Did he know about his father?

Did his father know about him?

*No*, Ferus thought. *He'd already be dead.*

Or worse.

Luke, Leia, and Han took him back to their quarters, treating him like a sick, weak old man. *And maybe they're right*, he thought, disgusted with himself. His Jedi training had made him adept at finding the calm center of any crisis. Yet here he was, allowing his emotions to overtake him, like an inexperienced Padawan.

Still, if his weakness gained him more time with Leia—with *Luke*—perhaps it was worth it. And so he smiled and nodded and allowed them to believe he needed their help.

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"Luke Skywalker," he said, settling into a soft chair. "Unusual name." Luke and Leia hovered anxiously over him, while Han took a seat on the sofa. Across the room, another man leaned against the wall, casually scanning a datapad. At least, that's how the man wanted it to seem. But his dark eyes were fixed on Ferus, measuring his every move. "You're not from these parts, I suspect?"

Luke shook his head, his familiar smile a faint, terrifying echo of the past.

Anakin had smiled rarely when Ferus was around, but occasionally even Ferus had caught glimpses of the boy's easy charm. It had been an excellent mask.

When they were boys together, Anakin had not yet taken his first steps down the path to the dark side. But there had always been something, hadn't there? Something only Ferus had sensed—something that called to the darkness.

*Leia is his child, too*, Ferus reminded himself. But it wasn't the same. There was no darkness inside of Leia, only light.

"Nowhere near these parts," Luke said, peering at Ferus like he was trying to solve a puzzle. "I'm from Tatooine."

*That much, I knew*, Ferus thought. *But how did you come to be here? And why didn't Obi-Wan warn me?*

That was Obi-Wan for you. The Jedi only dispersed information on a need-to-know basis. And he seemed to feel there was little Ferus needed to know.

He hadn't heard from Obi-Wan in more than a year. Ferus had contacted him after the destruction of Alderaan, but Obi-Wan had responded to none of his transmissions. "You're very far from home," Ferus said. "You must miss it."

Several emotions flashed across Luke's face. Grief. Regret. Guilt.

Luke chose determination. "I'm where I need to be. It's like Ben said—" He stopped abruptly, shaking his head.

"Ben?" Ferus prompted him, something clenching in his chest. Years before, he had visited Obi-Wan on Tatooine. The

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Jedi Master lived as a hermit in the desert wasteland, but he had occasionally traded with some of the local creatures. They had called him by a different name. *Ben*.

Luke glanced at Leia, as if reminding himself that Ferus was not to be trusted. Ferus felt something in the boy shut down. “It’s nothing,” he said quickly. “Just something an old friend of mine used to say.”

“Is he with you on Delaya? Can I meet him?” Ferus realized he was sounding too eager. “To thank him for protecting Her Highness,” he added with more restraint. “As I thank all of you.”

Luke looked down. “He’s dead.”

A shock wave crashed over Ferus, drowning out all sound, sight, and thought. The thought was unbelievable, *unacceptable*.

This “Ben” could have been anyone, he thought. There was no evidence linking him to Obi-Wan. Ferus wanted to grab for the tiny sliver of hope—but the Jedi in him rebelled against denying the truth.

And the truth was, some part of him had already known. Hadn’t *wanted* to know, but known nonetheless.

Obi-Wan was gone. Ferus was alone.

He realized there was a glass of water in his hand. Lost in his daze, he hadn’t even noticed the watchful stranger cross the room. Now the man knelt before him, peering intently into his eyes. “You went rather pale again—perhaps it would help to drink something.”

Ferus shrank away from the man’s touch. There was something in him—not *wrong*, but missing.

“And you are?” Ferus asked, his voice creaking like he hadn’t used it in years.

“Tobin Elad,” the man said, offering a hand to shake. Ferus forced himself to accept.

The Force flowed through every being in the galaxy. Good or evil, they all pulsed with different shades of the same energy. But there were a few beings in the galaxy who, for reasons even the Jedi didn’t understand, lived beyond the energy flow. They

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couldn't be categorized into light or dark—they were simply null points, empty, as if they didn't exist.

This man existed, but the Force flowed *around* him, not through him. Nothing could penetrate the hollow at his center.

Ferus released the man's hand with poorly disguised relief. Touching him had been like grasping a puff of cold air.

"You're ill," Leia said, torn between annoyance and concern. "Is there someone we can call for you?"

*Not anymore*, he thought sourly, shaking his head.

But that wasn't true, was it? He wasn't alone in the galaxy, not with Luke and Leia standing before him. He need only speak the truth of their united past, reveal himself as a Jedi...It would be a shock for Leia, but perhaps it was time. Wasn't it wrong of him to deny her the truth, that most powerful weapon?

*No.*

The voice came from inside his head and outside at the same time.

*Have patience.*

Obi-Wan's voice.

Was his grief so deep that he'd conjured an imaginary Obi-Wan, complete with Obi-Wan's maddening caution? Was it a manifestation of the Force?

Or was it Obi-Wan himself, dead and yet somehow still alive?

*The time will come to speak the truth*, the voice said. *But not yet. Trust me.*

For whatever reason, Ferus did.

*Why doesn't he tell them?* X-7 thought. He could tell from the look in Fess's eye, the tension in his spine, the careful way he avoided touching X-7 when they brushed past each other—Fess knew something was up.

But he said nothing.

*Interesting*, X-7 thought. *But how did he know?*

This was the troublesome part. X-7's disguise was perfect. Certainly it should have taken more than a glance and a

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handshake for the stranger to see through him. As time passed, the struggle to maintain his disguise was proving to be more and more exhausting. Had he finally slipped?

Perhaps it was simpler than that: After all, one fraud can almost always recognize another.

And if X-7 was sure of anything, it was this: Fess Ilee was a fraud.

Fooling most people was easy—you just manipulated their emotions, showed them what they wanted to see. But X-7 had no emotions, and X-7 wanted nothing. Not in the normal sense, at least.

Which meant he couldn't be fooled in the normal sense.

Apparently this Fess, whoever he was—whatever he was—couldn't be fooled, either.

*If you're smart, you'll stay out of my way, X-7 thought. If not, I'll find out who you really are.*

*And then I'll know how to destroy you.*

## Chapter Ten

*He watches her climb out the window and leap nimbly to the ground. She sprints into the shadows.*

*He follows.*

*Ferus knows he could alert Bail Organa to his daughter's departure—but that is not his job. He is only to observe and, when necessary, protect.*

*He has observed a smart, headstrong girl. Too stubborn and too careless, with a fierce sense of justice. He has seen her pick a fight with a boy twice her size, avenging the ill treatment of a wounded thranta. He has watched her do battle with her father over etiquette and homework and when she will be permitted to accompany him to Coruscant—but none of the arguments have changed the fact that she adores him, studies every move Bail Organa makes, wants to be just like him when she grows up.*

*It is Ferus's job to make sure she has the chance.*

*Just a job, he reminds himself constantly. Leia charms everyone around her. Such a serious face, such an intense will, in such a young girl. But Ferus knows well the dangers of growing attached. It blinds the senses, dulls the instincts. Leia has a large family, a full staff, an entire planet of people to love her. But she has only one who is solely dedicated to protecting her. Love is just a distraction.*

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*The shadows appear just as she approaches the deserted marketplace. For a second, Ferus imagines he sees a pack of wild taopari stalking the young princess. Then his vision resolves itself: They are men, three of them.*

*But they are stalking her nonetheless.*

*She notices nothing. She is nearly skipping down the street, arms outstretched to the darkness. He can feel the joy rolling off her in waves. Her anger at her father has dissipated, leaving behind a pure exuberance at being alone in the night. She is free, and the freedom is forbidden, making it all the sweeter.*

*She doesn't sense the danger—but Ferus can. He activates his lightsaber. The blue blade shimmers in the night. Ferus stretches out with the Force, and the men's whispers tickle his ears as if he is standing invisibly in their midst.*

*"Too risky, it's got to be a trap."*

*"Don't be paranoid, she's on her own. Now's our chance."*

*"She's just a kid; they wouldn't let her out alone like this."*

*"Exactly, she's a kid, she probably ran away. They might not even know she's gone yet, and by the time they do, we'll be long gone."*

*"It's still a risk."*

*"No risk, no reward. And Senator Aak's going to pay big."*

*"Bold move, using Organa's daughter to blackmail him."*

*"Bold and brilliant—if the Senator gets the kid, Organa will vote however he wants. His power's gone."*

*"We're not gonna hurt her, right? She's a kid."*

*"You said that already."*

*"No, we're not gonna hurt her."*

*"As long as she behaves."*

*Ferus strikes. He streaks through the dark night, invisible but for his glowing blade. The blade swoops down in a graceful arc, slicing through the largest man's blaster. In a single, fluid move, Ferus whirls around and jabs his foot into a soft, fleshy stomach. There is a quiet "oof," and the second man drops to the ground. Ferus steps down hard on his wrist, forcing him to drop the laser pistol he's just retrieved.*

*The third man strikes at Ferus's head. The blaster hilt slams into his skull. Before Ferus can protect himself, another blow lands. There is sharp*



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*crack of durasteel on bone. Ferus stumbles backward, dazed. His vision clouds over.*

*That shouldn't have happened, he thinks, lashing out blindly with his lightsaber. Perhaps the years of inaction have left him soft. Clumsy. Perhaps his connection with the Force is weakening. It wouldn't be the first time.*

*A laser bolt whizzes by, close enough that he can feel the heat against his cheek. He raises his light-saber, stretching instinctively toward the incoming blasts. As he breathes in deeply, trying to absorb the throbbing pain in his head, blast after blast sparks off the glowing blade.*

*One of the men he's knocked to the ground is climbing to his feet. He lunges toward Ferus.*

*"No!" shouts the man with the blaster. "You'll block the shot!"*

*It is all the opening Ferus needs.*

*The first man throws a punch. Ferus ducks and grabs his forearm in a durasteel grip. He pulls the struggling man into a tight embrace, using his body as a shield. The blaster bolts stop instantly.*

*The pain in his head ebbs away, and the moment stretches. He is suddenly clear on how to end this.*

*The Force is with him again.*

*Ferus grabs the thug he's using as a shield and flings him toward the man holding the blaster. It is a direct hit. They stumble backward and hit the ground in a tangled heap. The blaster goes flying. Ferus lunges forward and snatches it out of the air. He grips his lightsaber, poised to strike.*

*But the men stay on the ground. They know this is over.*

*"I don't want to hurt you," Ferus growls, as the thugs cower beneath him. He suddenly realizes this is a lie. They are enemies of the princess—thus he wants to destroy them.*

*It is a dangerous emotion, and he allows it to flow through him, leaking away. He has seen what anger can do. It offers a sweet power that he never wants to taste again.*

*Only one of the men is still on his feet, and he takes a step toward Ferus, then thinks better of it. Ferus gestures to the ground with his lightsaber. The man drops down beside his fellow conspirators.*

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*Ferus feels a tinge of battle rush, the dizzy excitement that always follows a victory. It's been so long since he has stood against an enemy face to face. So long since he's gripped his lightsaber with anything but nostalgia and regret.*

*His lightsaber...They have not seen his face, but they have seen his weapon. If stories spread of a Jedi wandering the streets of Alderaan, it will draw the Empire's scrutiny. He has endangered himself. Which means he has endangered Leia.*

*Vader would kill them, Ferus thinks suddenly. They are my enemies, they are Leia's enemies. Vader would argue that it is the only way.*

*There was a time when dark thoughts like that bubbled up inside of him, disguised as his own. The dark side of the Force lay at the bottom of a steep cliff, and he had come far too close to the edge.*

*Those days are behind him.*

*He reaches out with the Force, shaping their minds to his will. "You wish to leave this planet," he says without malice. "Leave the system. You no longer wish to work for Senator Aak, or anyone who would use a child as a bargaining chip."*

*The men shake their heads, their gazes blank. "We wish to leave this planet," they chorus.*

*"No one attacked you tonight," Ferus says, retreating into the night. "There was no Jedi. No lightsaber. You never even saw the princess."*

*One of the men elbows another. "Let's get out of here," he says, sounding confused. "What are we doing, helping some political hack use a kid as a bargaining chip?"*

*"Not just the planet," another of the men says. "Let's get out of the system."*

*"Why are we even out here tonight?" the third says, as they wander off into the night.*

*Ferus still needs to deal with Senator Aak, to make sure this never happens again. That will not be as easy. But for tonight, he has succeeded. The princess is safe.*

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Ferus thought he had experienced too much grief in his life to ever hurt again.

Wrong.

His body felt wrenched out of shape, the absence of Obi-Wan as visceral as a missing limb. He somehow found enough strength to return to his own chambers, but once there, he was lost.

He had lived with an ever present ache for years, ever since Leia had grown old enough to take her own stand against the Empire. Ferus knew he couldn't follow her to the Galactic Senate, just as he couldn't follow her on Rebel missions. He had found the strength to let her go off on her own, but he had never found a way to make the agonizing worry fade.

Ferus had been in space when Alderaan was attacked. Terrified by reports that Leia's ship had been destroyed, Bail Organa had sent him to investigate. Ferus had long refused to join Organa's Rebel Alliance—however much he may have wanted to fight the Empire, his place was in the shadows. His role was protector, not warrior. But this wasn't about the Alliance, this was about helping Leia, and it was a request Organa knew Ferus would never refuse.

It was a request that had saved him. Shortly after Ferus lifted off, Alderaan had been destroyed. That same day, reports had surfaced that the princess was safe and sound. Knowing that Leia was safe had offered Ferus his only consolation in the time of unthinkable tragedy.

It had never occurred to him that Leia wasn't the only one to worry about.

Like all Padawans at the Jedi Temple, Ferus had grown up without parents, without a family. But who needed a mother or a father, when you had Jedi Masters like Yoda, Siri Tachi, and Obi-Wan Kenobi shaping your path?

When Ferus had decided to leave the Jedi Order, Obi-Wan had accepted his decision. Years away from the Jedi had not dimmed his respect for the great Master, tempered as it often was

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by irritation. The deep bond between them rested not only on their shared past, but on their future, and the fact that after Order Sixty-Six, each was all that the other had left.

"Never pause too long to mourn the dead, lest you do disservice to the living."

At the sound of the familiar voice, laced with dry wit and a hint of good humor, Ferus whirled around. And there he was. Well, not *there*, exactly. Not in the full-bodied flesh. Shimmering, translucent, present and yet somehow absent at the same time—but *there*. "Obi-Wan?" Ferus gasped. "But you're—"

"Dead. Yes." Obi-Wan smiled sadly. He seemed older than Ferus remembered, his face ravaged by age. Was it life that had been so hard on him, or death? "A necessary inconvenience."

"How is this possible?"

"The past is the past," Obi-Wan said brusquely. "We have much to discuss about our present dilemmas. First —"

"No!" It was so typical of Obi-Wan, this refusal to offer any "unnecessary" explanation. The Jedi was just as infuriating from beyond the grave. "You expect me to act as if nothing of importance has occurred?"

There was a long silence. "You've suffered greatly, I know," Obi-Wan said finally, his voice grave. "But you are not alone, Ferus." He spoke as if he could see inside Ferus's head.

Maybe he could.

The two men stood silently for several moments, absorbing the emotion of the situation, letting it flow through and between them. This was the Jedi way, to acknowledge, and move on.

Gradually, Ferus pulled himself together, accepting the new reality. As if sensing his ability to continue, Obi-Wan spoke. He told Ferus what had happened to him on Tatooine, how he and Luke had faced Darth Vader on the Death Star...how he had fallen.

"It's imperative that Luke not learn the truth about his father," Obi-Wan said urgently. "He's not ready."

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"I don't see how I can train him without revealing his past," Ferus argued. "It wouldn't be fair to him."

"You won't be training him," Obi-Wan said. "Luke has learned all he needs to know for the moment, or at least all he can absorb. He needs time."

"What he needs is a lightsaber lesson!" Ferus argued. "Time won't give him control of the Force, or teach him how to fight the battles you know he will face."

"But it will allow him to discover the kind of man he is."

*And without our guidance, what kind of man will he be?* Ferus thought. *How will we learn whether darkness dwells inside of him?*

But out of respect for the fallen Master, he kept this fear to himself.

"In other words, you want to watch and wait," he said, instead. "As usual."

"The time when I could give you orders is long behind us," Obi-Wan said. "I can only ask that you trust me."

"It would mean keeping my identity from him," Ferus warned. "Allowing him to believe that he's truly alone."

"He's not alone," Obi-Wan pointed out. "He has Leia."

And so they came to the subject Ferus had been hoping to avoid. "And Leia, what of her? You would have me continue to lie to her as well? Let her fight side by side with her brother, never knowing who he is—or what *she* is?"

"You have many secrets from her."

It plagued him. Each morning, Ferus woke up, wondering, *Is this the day? Will I finally reveal everything?* But something always held him back. *She wasn't ready*, he told himself. Not yet.

Now he wondered whether that was caution—or fear. While Luke seemed so youthful and naive, Leia was wise and strong. She was everything that Obi-Wan hoped Luke would become—even if Obi-Wan, so focused on Luke, couldn't see it.

*Just like Anakin.* Ferus immediately tried to squelch the thought. Obi-Wan had been so determined to see the best in Anakin, so sure that his Padawan was the chosen one, superior to

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all others. How much had that certainty blinded him to the dangerous reality?

This was different, Ferus told himself. It was understandable that Obi-Wan focused on Luke, even to the point of overlooking Leia's potential. But Ferus had no such excuse. If Obi-Wan had deemed Luke ready for the truth— or part of it, at least—maybe he owed Leia the same.

“Only you know what Leia is capable of, and what she needs,” Obi-Wan said. Again, Ferus wondered if the Jedi Master could penetrate his thoughts. “As I ask for your trust, I give you mine.”

Only then did Ferus realize how much he'd been hoping Obi-Wan would tell him what to do. Much as he hated taking orders, this was one decision he'd prefer leaving to someone else.

## Chapter Eleven

**H**undreds of survivors crowded into the large chamber, their bodies packed together. There was no space large enough for the thousands of Alderaan survivors who would have wanted to attend a memorial. So these six hundred had been drawn by lot. Everyone else would—if they chose—watch a Live Holonet broadcast.

Var Lyonn introduced Leia, then stepped off the podium, joining Han behind the stage. “She’s rather magnificent, isn’t she?” Lyonn murmured. Han, who didn’t trust the man, answered with a terse nod.

But he agreed.

Leia stood before the crowd for several long moments without speaking. Han didn’t know how she could stand it, staring out at their miserable faces. He looked away from them, up at the arched ceiling, its ribbons of colored transparisteel showering the room with dancing greens and blues.

“We will never replace what we have lost,” Leia said slowly. She spoke softly, but the circling ampdroids carried her voice throughout the chamber. “We can only remember it.”

She pressed a button on the podium, and a large viewscreen behind her flickered to life. There, in vibrant, living color, were

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the Alderaan grass seas. The skies alive with swooping thrantas. The polar sea shimmering with ice.

There were gasps from the audience. A few muffled sobs. And then a solemn silence.

The images were unrelenting: The towering Oro Woods, threaded with glittering rainbow-colored lichen. The imposing Castle Lands, casting their solemn shadow over the surrounding plains. As a lost world flickered behind her, Leia spoke of the beauty of Alderaan and those who lived there. She spoke of the lives lost, never once mentioning the losses she'd personally suffered. That was something she never spoke of, Han had noticed. Publicly, at least, she mourned the destruction of Alderaan as its sovereign—never as a fellow citizen who had lost her family and her home.

“Upon this stage is an empty capsule,” Leia told the crowd. “And now I ask you, each of you, to fill it. With your memories and your keepsakes, with gifts for the ones you lost, with symbols and reminders of what you miss the most. There is a home here for each of your memories. And when this capsule is sealed, it will be jettisoned into space. Into the debris field that exists where there should be a planet. I’m told that some call it the Graveyard, but I choose to believe that Alderaan lives on there, not in space, but in spirit. This capsule will do what all of us long to do, and never can. It will return home.”

There was a pause, so silent and still that it seemed the room had stopped breathing. And then a young woman in the front row climbed onto the stage. She paused before the empty capsule, her lips moving soundlessly. Then she dropped a small, polished stone inside. Soon she was surrounded by survivors, eager to put something of their own in the capsule. They had come prepared. One by one, perfectly orderly, with frowns and sorry smiles and tears streaming, they filed past. Crowding the stage, the capsule, and when it was over, Leia. Their princess.

Han couldn’t stand it. All this raw emotion—it wasn’t his thing. “Keep an eye on her, will ya?” he asked Chewbacca, who



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barked a *yes*. Han slipped outside, threading through the crowds of those who couldn't fit into the building but still wanted to be near.

Suddenly, Han spotted a familiar-looking mop of greasy hair. He shot out an arm and clamped his hand down on the kid's shoulder. "You!"

It was the punk from the day before, the one who'd tried to scam them out of their credits. His eyes went wide with panic, and he tried to wriggle out of Han's grip, but Han held tight.

The other two boys approached, one obviously terrified, the other doing his best to look fierce. "Let him go," the bolder one ordered.

Han suppressed a grin. "Or what?"

"Or...or..." He obviously couldn't come up with anything.

It was equally obvious he wasn't about to leave his friend behind. Han couldn't help but admire him, thief or not.

He glared at the kid straining against his grip. "If I let you go, you promise not to disappear on me?"

"He doesn't promise anything," the mouthy one said. "You want to turn us in, go ahead. We're not going to help you."

"Why would I want to turn you in?"

"Why wouldn't you? We tried to steal from you."

The kid may have been bold, but he wasn't very bright, not if he was standing here in public admitting to his crimes. Han could have taught him a few things.

If he was in the business of babysitting bothersome little punks, of course.

"For one thing, you may be thieves, but you're not very good thieves," Han said. He smirked. "And for an *old man*, I know a thing or two about needing to steal."

The kid jerked his head at the one Han was holding onto. The boy immediately stopped squirming. Han let go.

"What do you want?" the boldest one said. "We don't have all day."

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*Acting like he's in charge*, Han thought with a grin. *Kid doesn't know when to keep his mouth shut.*

"I can get you inside," Han offered. "If you want."

The kids shook their heads.

"But you're here," Han said. "You don't want to see the show?"

"Only here because we got nowhere else to be," the lead kid said. He was a bad liar, but Han let it pass.

"Hungry?" he asked. They shook their heads—but when he offered them the bag of Corellian potato sticks he'd been snacking on, they took it.

"So you're from Alderaan?" he asked.

"From nowhere," the kid said. "Not anymore."

"Come on, Mazi, not today," one of the other boys said.

"*Every* day, Jez." The one called Mazi scowled and shoved his hands into his pockets. "You ask me, we're better off forgetting the whole thing ever happened. We *are* from nowhere. Now."

"I can't forget," the third, youngest boy said softly. He kept his eyes on the entrance to the building, as if secretly wishing he could go inside. "I don't want to."

Now that they'd dropped the tough act, Han realized they were younger than he'd thought. The oldest couldn't be more than fifteen, if that. Some might think that was too young to be on your own. Han knew better.

"Go on," Mazi said. "Ask. You know you want to."

Han shrugged. "Maybe I'm like you, kid. I don't want anything."

"He means you can ask us how we ended up here," the smallest one said. "We don't care."

Han did want to know. But not as much, he suspected, as they wanted to tell him. "You got me," he said. "Shoot."

"It was my idea," Mazi said. "Jez and Lan didn't think our parents would agree, but I talked 'em into it."

"Mazi can talk anyone into anything," Lan said, looking at the older boy with something close to worship.

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Mazi shrugged, but a smile pulled at the corners of his lips. "Dad was easy. Like always. But Mom..."

"She thought we were too young to go by ourselves," Jez said. "She worries a lot."

"Worried," Mazi said sharply.

Jez flinched. "Yeah."

"There was a smashball tournament on Delaya," Mazi said in a dead voice. "We got permission to go to the game, stay overnight on our own, then go back to Alderaan in the morning."

Han winced. "But that was the day..."

"Yeah," Mazi snapped. "That was the day. So here we are. On our own." He glared at Han. "Don't think you have to pity us or something. We're fine. We know how to get by. We do what we need to do."

"Yeah," Han said. "I can see that."

"So aren't you going to tell us how everything's going to be okay, blah blah whatever?"

Han pressed his lips together. He leaned back against the wall, tipping his head up to the sky. He'd heard Alderaan had once been close enough that you could see it with the naked eye. Not in the daytime, of course. Under the bright sun it was easy to imagine that Alderaan was still up there somewhere. But Han didn't believe in lying to himself.

He knew what these kids were in for. He'd been there.

"Kid, if you're lucky, you'll live through it. Nothing I can tell you but that."

*I've never known her*, Luke thought, watching Leia greet the admiring crowds. *Not really.*

Watching her preside over the memorial, watching her now console her subjects, Luke realized that this royal bearing was no act. She was still the same Leia that he'd come to know, but she was more than that: a Senator. A princess. For the first time,

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Luke understood these weren't just titles—they were a part of her.

"Luke, this is Kiro Chen," she said now, introducing him to a young man with dark hair and a timid smile. Like the other survivors, his eyes were hooded and rimmed by red. Something about him seemed familiar, though Luke was sure they'd never met. They followed her to a secluded area behind the stage. "He's the one I told you about, who's been working with General Rieekan on recruitment efforts. We couldn't have set up tomorrow's meeting without him."

Luke gave him a terse nod. "So did you know?" he asked. "About the warehouses?"

Kiro's eyes widened. "Of course not! Leia just told me, and I'm as horrified as the rest of you."

Luke frowned. "But if you've been here all this time—"

"Drop it, Luke. He's been busy trying to help the Alliance," Leia said, in a tone that defied argument. "You can't blame him for believing Var Lyonn's lies, any more than you can blame me."

It was strange to see Leia so obviously comfortable with a stranger. Usually she was guarded, almost icy, in front of people she didn't know. But obviously Leia trusted this man. *Maybe it's because they're both from Alderaan*, Luke thought. *They share a common pain.*

Kiro was an ally, and Leia's ready trust in him shouldn't have bothered Luke.

But it did.

"So it's true!" Halle Dray appeared beside them, as if out of nowhere. Beside her was J'er Nahj—and Fess Ilee. "You come here claiming to want to help us, but all you really want are more martyrs for your cause."

Leia looked at her. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"There are rumors, Your Highness," Nahj said. His voice was gentler, but contained no kindness. "And given that you're here with *him*—" He glared at Kiro.

"I don't even know you," Kiro said. "Either of you."

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"But we know *you*," Halle said. "And we know what you've been up to."

Nahj looked sorrowfully at Leia. "It's hard to avoid the conclusion that you're recruiting soldiers for your Alliance."

"It's not *my* Alliance," Leia said, a little of the old fire returning to her voice. "It fights for all of us."

"Not for me," Halle snapped. "The Alderaan of my youth rejected fighting. It outlawed weapons, turned away from violence—until the blood-thirsty Organa family sucked it into a war it could never win."

"That's not how it happened!" Luke protested.

Halle turned the full power of her glare on him. "Stay out of things that don't concern you," she said in a low, dangerous voice. "Especially when you don't know what you're talking about."

"I know—"

"Luke!" Leia quieted him with a look. "It's fine."

"Her Highness only wants what is best for us," Kiro said. "We're all on the same side here. She's not your enemy."

"Alderaan had no enemies before her," Halle hissed. "Now we have no Alderaan. Call it what you want, but that's no coincidence."

Leia stayed silent. It was unlike her, refusing to defend herself in the face of such an attack.

"The Empire is an enemy to all of us, including Alderaan," Kiro argued. "And it's our duty to fight back."

"Yes, I've heard that's your line," Halle sneered. "I've been looking forward to meeting this Kiro Chen I've heard so much about, the one who delights in leading our people to the slaughter. There's something I've been wanting to say to you."

She slapped his face. Then walked away.

Kiro rubbed his hand across his cheek, where Halle's hand had left an angry red mark. "She's upset," he said, almost to himself. "She doesn't know what she's saying."

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"We're all upset," Nahj said. He spoke softly, but his eyes were angry. "When you promised to help us in any way you could, Your Highness, I didn't realize that meant sending us off to die at the hands of the Empire."

"Every Rebel is a *volunteer*," Leia said. "Every man and woman here is free to choose."

Luke shot her a sharp look. She was coming dangerously close to admitting that Halle and Nahj were right, that she was recruiting for the Rebel Alliance. It was a dangerous slip. And that wasn't like her, either.

"You're their leader," Nahj snapped. "They do as you ask."

*Their* leader, Luke noted, not *our*.

Leia whipped her gaze toward Fess. "Does he speak for you, too?"

"I speak for myself," Fess said.

It was odd. Luke had heard Leia's stories about Fess's buffoonery and empty-headedness. But the stories didn't match the man.

"You take danger upon yourself so easily," Fess said, "and the fight is all you need to sustain you. So it's understandably difficult for you to understand that these people here don't need a fight. They need food. Bacta. Blankets. You're offering them a war. That's no substitute for a home."

"I'm offering them a reason to *live*," Leia shot back. "The Alliance gives me a reason to go forward. Everyone should have that chance."

"Not everyone's like you," Fess pointed out. "Some people just want to live in peace."

Luke flashed back to Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru's broken bodies. They'd never wanted to fight anyone. But the Empire hadn't cared.

"Not everyone's like *you*, either," Leia said, her face white with rage. "Not everyone's so craven and weak. So *useless*."

Fess opened his mouth—then shut it again. He turned to Nahj. "I think it's best if I go."

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Nahj nodded. "I'll go with you." He extended a hand to Leia. "You made me a promise, Your Highness. I hope you do not forget it."

"I've promised to defeat the Empire," Leia said. "And nothing's more important than that."

## Chapter Twelve

**Y**ou're late," Halle Dray snarled, barring the door. "You're sure no one followed you?"

Ferus nodded. "Why do you think I'm late?"

She stepped aside.

"You never mentioned you were so cozy with the princess," she said, as he followed her into the abandoned house. The others had already arrived. They were assembled in the dusty remains of the living room. Shards of transparisteel littered the floor, and moonlight filtered in through the shattered windows. It was a sad, forgotten place in a sad, forgotten corner of the city. A perfect spot for secrets.

"Cozy isn't the word I would use," Ferus pointed out. "In case you hadn't noticed, she hates me. Even more so, now that she realizes I'm with you."

"That's right." Halle's voice was laced with sarcasm. "Sometimes I forget—you're with us."

It had taken Ferus very little time to get the others to trust him, but Halle Dray remained the lone holdout. He didn't take it personally: She trusted no one.

J'er Nahj had once told Ferus that she'd worked at a wildlife medcenter on Alderaan, tending to injured stalking birds and sick



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grazers. But that was *before*, in what she referred to as her other life. If there was any gentleness left in her now, she hid it well.

"We were right," Halle told the group, as the meeting began. "Leia is here to draft survivors into the Rebellion. She pretends to want to help us, but she's just looking for martyrs to her cause."

"Do you have proof?" Ferus asked.

"Wherever Leia goes, a new crop of Rebel fighters is sure to follow. I don't believe in that kind of coincidence."

Ferus frowned. "Leia's Rebel sympathies are well known. It doesn't mean she's on a recruiting mission."

"Wake up, Fess," Halle snapped. "She's had her minions poking around Delaya for weeks now. And here she is to close the deal. You saw her with Kiro Chen."

There was murmuring at the name. Though none of them knew Kiro personally, it was common knowledge that he'd been working with General Rieekan. And everyone knew that Rieekan spoke for the Alliance.

"I wanted to believe that she was sincere about trying to help us," Nahj said. "But it seems clear that she has other priorities."

The twin brothers Driscoll and Trey Bruhnej muttered to each other in disgust. "She hasn't gotten enough of us killed?" Driscoll said aloud.

"Apparently two billion isn't enough to satisfy her," Halle said. "Which is why this time, we're going to stop her."

"And how exactly will we do that?" Ferus asked dryly, concealing his concern.

"Tomorrow night, she and her allies plan to sneak away from their government 'protectors,'" Halle said. "They've planned a secret meeting with those of our people foolish enough to believe their Rebel lies. That meeting is *not* going to happen."

Ferus kept his expression blank. So Halle had someone watching Leia. Against his will, his mind jumped instantly to the boys he occasionally paid to run errands. Mazi and his brothers

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seemed willing to do just about anything for credits. Had it been mere coincidence that they'd attacked Leia in that alley?

Like Halle, Ferus was reluctant to believe in coincidences.

J'er Nahj shook his head. "Disrupting the meeting won't help. If our people are foolish enough to join the princess and her Rebellion, they will do so—tomorrow or the next day."

"They can't join the princess if the princess is no longer asking," Halle said.

"She won't stop," Nahj said. "She doesn't seem to understand that Alderaan has paid enough."

"Why should she?" Halle scoffed. "When she's paid nothing."

It was far from the truth, Ferus knew. But he stayed silent.

"The meeting won't happen because the princess won't be available," Halle added. "She'll be with us."

"Kidnapping?" Nahj said. "No."

"You disapprove of the methods?" Halle asked wryly. "I admit I'm rather surprised."

"That was a mistake," Nahj protested. "And the boy proved it when he helped us of his own accord."

Ferus suppressed his anger. He'd heard rumors, but this was the first confirmation. So Nahj had taken Luke to the warehouse against his will—and somehow, Luke had turned the situation to his advantage. But if things had gone wrong...

It was terrifying, how fragile the situation was. If Obi-Wan was right about Luke, and the future of the galaxy rested on his shoulders, how could it be right to let him blunder around without proper training and protection? What if the unthinkable happened?

"That may have been a mistake," Halle said, "but this isn't. Princess Leia is a valuable commodity—rumor is the Emperor himself wants to get his hands on her. Just imagine what he might be willing to offer us in return."

"You're talking about ransoming off the princess? To the *Empire*?" Nahj asked in disbelief. "They'd kill her."

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"They'd give us a home," Halle said quietly. "A new planet. A new Alderaan."

"What makes you think that?" Driscoll asked.

"Because they've already agreed."

"You contacted the Empire?" Ferus asked. Nausea swept over him at the thought of Darth Vader's ship hurtling toward the planet, his dark shadow creeping over Leia...

"Halle, how could you?" Nahj asked.

"Look what she's done to us!" Halle cried fiercely. "Alderaan is *gone* and still she longs for more death. Our troubles won't end until someone stops her. And if, in doing so, we gain a new home for ourselves? Can't you see it, J'er? The sacrifice of one—for the good of so many." She slapped her palms flat against the table. "The Empire is only our enemy because the princess *made* them our enemy. We were a peaceful people, once, and the Empire understands that we can be peaceful again. They want to help us...if we help them."

"You've been planning this for a while," Nahj guessed.

"We knew Leia would show up eventually," Halle said, unashamed. "I intended to be ready."

Driscoll and Trey gave each other a long, intense look, as if exchanging some kind of silent twin communication. They nodded as one. "Yes. We agree."

Halle looked at Nahj. "I don't like it either, J'er," she said quietly. "If there were another way..."

Nahj lowered his eyes. "Yes, if there were another way...but perhaps there is not."

Fess couldn't believe it. Nahj was passionate about what he believed in, but had always seemed kind and reasonable. How could he—how could any of them—convince himself that this was right?

"And you, Fess?" Halle said, turning the name into a hiss. "You're awfully quiet. If you disapprove, feel free to leave right now."

## Alex Wheeler

Ferus knew that if he objected, there was a slim chance he might sway them. Explain to them how it felt to compromise yourself to evil, bit by bit, until there was no turning back. On the other hand, if he failed to convince them, they would cut him off. He wouldn't learn the details of their plan; he would lose his chance to save Leia.

From the beginning, he'd sensed that this group could prove dangerous. And Halle's fierce hatred of Leia had concerned him. He'd suspected that if there was trouble, Leia could end up in the middle of it. This was why he'd worked so hard to worm his way in. It seemed foolish to walk away now, just when his efforts were paying off.

He'd made so many wrong decisions in his life.

What was one more?

"I'm in."

Luke was almost relieved when he heard the knock. He'd spent the last hour pacing restlessly, listening to Kiro Chen and Leia strategize. He didn't feel that it was his place to express any opinions—even Han was keeping his mouth shut. But it was more than a little frustrating to stand silent.

Not that Luke disagreed with everything Leia said. The success of the Rebellion was crucial. Beating the Empire *mattered*. He was just no longer sure it was *all* that mattered. But Leia didn't want to hear that, not from him. She'd made that perfectly clear.

Any distraction would be a welcome one.

He opened the door and took a step backward. Fess Ilee stared back at him. Luke didn't know what it was about the man that made him feel comfortable and unnerved, both at the same time. He stepped aside, allowing Fess into the room.

"Your Highness, we have a problem," Fess said abruptly.

Leia arched an eyebrow. "*W*e?"

## STAR WARS: Hostage

“Greetings, sir,” C-3PO interrupted, eager to finally observe some protocol. “Might I offer you a drink, or perhaps some fresh-baked sweetsonberry loaf?”

“He’s not staying,” Leia said sharply.

“I’ve come only to bring a message, and then I’ll go,” Fess said.

“Well? I’m listening.”

Fess looked around the crowded room, the suspicion clear in his eyes.

“Everyone in this room has proven their loyalty to the cause,” Leia said. “Except you.”

Fess looked doubtful, but he gave in. “You can’t attend your meeting tomorrow. You’re in danger.”

Leia cast a sharp glance at Kiro. “What meeting?” she asked innocently.

Fess shook his head. “There’s no time for that now. I know about the meeting you’re planning for tomorrow—and so do Halle Dray and J’er Nahj. They’re planning to grab you and hand you over to the Empire.”

“I’ve spoken with Nahj, and he seemed like a good man,” Leia said skeptically. “I can’t believe he would resort to kidnapping.”

Luke winced. “I believe he would, Leia.” As he told them the truth of how he’d first met J’er Nahj, Luke felt a sharp stab of guilt. His lie to Leia had nearly put her in danger.

Leia was looking at him curiously, like she wanted to ask why he’d kept this a secret until now. But she didn’t. Maybe she just thought he’d lie to her all over again.

Instead, she turned to Fess. “Why come to me with this? You’ve made it very clear that you’re against us.”

“I’m with anyone who stands up to the Empire,” Fess admitted. “Halle and Nahj mean well, but they tend to act rashly. I let them believe I agreed with them because I thought it might be the only way to stop them from doing something they can’t take back. I see I was right.”

## Alex Wheeler

"Except you weren't able to stop them," Leia pointed out. "So you've come here, to stop us, instead. I won't run away. I came here to find reinforcements for the Rebel fight, and that's what I'm going to do."

"Even if it gets you killed?" Han asked sourly. "Last time you messed with the Empire, they weren't exactly rolling out the royal welcome wagon."

Luke hated to agree with him, but...

"You're too important to the Alliance," he said. "We can't risk your safety."

"We can't risk the *galaxy*," Leia shot back.

"Might I suggest a compromise, Princess Leia?" Kiro said hesitantly. "Simply move the meeting to a different time and location."

"And what's to stop one of the leaders you're meeting from reporting the new plans back to Nahj?" Fess asked. "You may have got a leak."

"So we give them a false rendezvous point," Kiro said. "When they arrive, we'll confiscate their comlinks, then lead them to the princess. That way, they have no chance to report her coordinates to anyone."

"I think you're forgetting our biggest problem," Han cut in. "We can handle this amateur stuff—but the Imperials are on their way. Am I the only one who'd rather be someplace else when they arrive?"

"Sounds like the Empire is expecting Halle and Nahj to do their dirty work for them," Kiro argued. "You can spend the night on your ship—it's safer there, anyway. We meet first thing in the morning. You'll be off-planet by the time Nahj and his group know what happened."

"Risky, but it could work," Elad said.

"I don't know," Luke said, watching Kiro closely. It felt wrong to discuss Leia's safety with outsiders in the room. "It sounds dangerous."

"Since when are *you* afraid of a little danger?" Leia asked.

## STAR WARS: Hostage

"This is different," Luke said fiercely.

"Why?"

*Because this is you.* But he knew better than to say it out loud.

*The night is alive with shadows. Leia can feel them out there, watching her, following her. She wants to go home.*

*But the streets all look the same. She is walking in circles. Lost.*

*The palace sits on a wide stretch of ground, its towers climbing high into the sky. She should be able to see it in the distance—but the buildings block her view. She needs to get to high ground.*

*She comes upon a half-finished building, a thin durasteel crane climbing up its stories of scaffolding. This is her answer. She scrambles onto the mast of the crane, propelling herself up its rungs. It's easy, like climbing a ladder, and soon she is ten stories above the ground. The arm of the crane overhangs a narrow catwalk that wraps around the unfinished building. She climbs onto it, slowly circling the scaffolding, staring out at the city. Your city, her father always tells her. Someday, it will be your responsibility.*

*The city twinkles beneath her, and she can see the lights of the palace off to the east.*

*She knows the way home.*

*Eagerly, she climbs down. Too eagerly.*

*Her foot skids off a rung.*

*Her fingers slip.*

*She is falling.*

*She reaches out but her hands clutch nothing but air. The rushing wind is icy against her face. For a moment, time seems to stretch out. She notices the moonlight glimmering off the durasteel. The stars twinkling over-head. The strange freedom of the fall, her legs and arms flailing through empty air, her stomach in her throat. And then the world speeds up again, and the ground, an unforgiving plane of duracrete, once so far away, is hurtling toward her. She screams, but the wind snatches the shriek out of her mouth and carries it away, and the ground is closer, and she is—*

*Caught.*

*For a moment, she thinks her father has saved her. But it is not her father lowering her to the ground. It is the detestable Fess Ilee.*

**Alex Wheeler**

*She jerks away from him and dusts herself off.*

*"What are you doing here?" she asks, her heart still pounding. She looks up to the top of the crane—up and up—wondering what would have happened if he hadn't caught her.*

*I would have caught myself, she thinks angrily. But he didn't give me the chance.*

*"I've come to take you home, Leia," he says.*

*She crosses her arms. "I don't need you," she spits out. "I can do it myself. I know how to go."*

*He nods. "Then you lead the way."*

*She walks east. She doesn't look back. Fess makes no noise, but she knows he is following. A small piece of her is glad. This only makes her hate him more.*

*The walk is long, her legs tired. As night leaks into day, she can barely keep her eyes open. She sits for a moment to rest, and lets her eyes drift shut. Only for a moment.*

*The next thing she knows, someone is carrying her. "Father?" she murmurs, still half asleep.*

*"It's just Fess," he says.*

*She wants to tell him that she doesn't need him, that she can do it herself. But she is so tired.*

*"Don't worry, you're safe with me."*

*She yawns, and closes her eyes again. "I know."*



## Chapter Thirteen

**Y**ou sure about this?" Luke asked nervously, glancing at Kiro Chen.

"He's sure," Leia snapped.

Leia had put out the word that the Rebel recruiting meeting had been rescheduled, and would take place in one of the T'wil Blossom Homes. But when the attendees arrived, they would find only Luke and Han, ready to confiscate their comlinks and lead them to the real location. Kiro and Leia would be waiting.

"At least let me send Chewie with you," Han said, sounding tense. Luke wondered if he was worried, too.

Kiro shook his head. A thin rivulet of sweat trickled down his neck. "The Wookiee would draw attention. But if you don't trust me to protect you, Your Highness, perhaps you would feel more secure if one of your friends accompanied us."

"No," Leia said fiercely. "How many times do I need to tell you all that I can protect myself?"

"I know that," Luke said. "But..."

"But what?"

Luke just shook his head in frustration. They'd argued all night long, and Leia hadn't budged. She was holding this meeting, no matter what. And she wanted Kiro Chen by her side

## Alex Wheeler

when it happened. “He’s one of us,” she’d told Luke, Han, and Elad.

The unspoken meaning was clear: *He’s one of us. You’re not.*

“Don’t worry,” Kiro assured Luke. “Everything’s going to go as planned. Easy as skinning a nerf.”

Luke looked at him for a long moment, once again seized by the certainty that he’d met Kiro somewhere before. The answer dangled almost within reach—and then was gone.

Han, Luke, and Chewbacca traipsed silently through the Delayan streets. They were nearly empty this time of morning, giving the city a sad air of abandonment. A few times, passing a dark window or shadowed entryway, Luke thought he caught a pair of eyes watching him. But whenever he turned to look, they were gone.

“I’ll be glad to get off this rock,” Han grumbled. Chewbacca barked his agreement.

“So why’d you stick around in the first place?” Luke asked.

Han shrugged. “Couldn’t tell ya, kid. It just felt wrong to leave her here alone—”

“She’s not *alone*,” Luke said indignantly. “I’m here.”

“Yeah, and so’s that blasted protocol droid of yours, but when the trouble starts, he’s not exactly the guy you want in your corner.”

“I can protect her just as well as you can,” Luke protested. “Better, even.”

“Whatever you say, kid.” Han shook his head. “Besides, it’s not like she wants either one of us to protect her.

“What makes you think we’ll have anything to protect her from?” Luke asked. “It’s a good plan.” But he could feel it, too. Something dark, hovering at the fringes of his mind.

Han groaned. “Where’ve you been, kid? Something *always* goes wrong.” He rolled his eyes. “But listen to that Kiro character and you’d think we were taking a trip to the Galactic Fair. ‘Easy as skinning a nerf.’ Right.”

## STAR WARS: Hostage

Luke stopped walking so abruptly that Chewbacca slammed into him, nearly knocking him to the ground. Han caught his arm and yanked him upright.

"Say that again," Luke said, as the darkness he'd been sensing began to take shape.

"Say what again? 'Easy as skinning a nerf?'"

Luke gasped. "It's him!"

"Him who?"

Chewbacca roared in confusion.

"I don't *know* what he's talking about," Han snapped. "That's what I'm trying to find out!"

But there wasn't time to explain. Leia was in danger. He took off running back toward the hotel. "It's Kiro Chen!" he shouted over his shoulder, as Han and Chewbacca raced after him. "He's not who he says he is!"

*Easy as skinning a nerf.*

Now he knew why Kiro had seemed familiar. It wasn't his face—it was his *voice*. The same voice he'd heard outside J'ér Nahj's lean-to the first day they'd met, arguing with Halle Dray about whether the young boy should have to apologize to Luke.

Kiro had claimed he didn't know Halle, or Nahj. He'd lied. Who knew what else he'd lied about—or what else he wanted?

And now he was alone with Leia.

Exactly as he'd planned.

Han spotted them first, arguing on a street corner. Kiro was tugging at Leia's arm, but she'd planted her feet firmly and crossed her arms. Finally, her stubbornness was coming in handy.

Han pulled Luke to a stop, pointing toward the princess. If they approached calmly, without revealing that they knew something was up, there was still a chance to—

"Leia!" Luke shouted, waving his arms at the princess. "Get away from him!"

## Alex Wheeler

"Great work, kid," Han muttered under his breath. He pulled out his blaster and started running again. This was about to get messy.

Leia backed away from Kiro, who pulled out a blaster of his own, aiming it at the princess. She froze.

"Careful," Kiro said, as Luke, Han, and Chewbacca approached. "I don't want to hurt her."

"Then how 'bout you drop the blaster!" Han shouted.

"Don't upset him," Luke murmured.

"Me?" Han shot back, out of the corner of his mouth. "*You're* telling *me* to stay calm, after what you—"

The kid looked more clueless than usual.

"Ah, forget it." Han turned his attention back to Kiro and Leia. She had her hands up, and was glaring at Kiro. Han cocked his blaster, but kept it aimed at the ground.

"You want to protect her?" Kiro asked, sounding almost sorry. "Drop your weapons."

Han caught Leia's eye. She gave him an imperceptible nod. He grinned, his grip tightening on the blaster. "I would, but last I heard, Her Highness prefers to protect herself!"

He raised his weapon. Kiro swung around to face Han, firing off a round of laser bolts. Han ducked the blasts, reluctant to fire back with Leia still in range.

But the princess could take care of herself. Taking advantage of Kiro's distraction, Leia dropped to a crouch. She rolled toward Kiro and knocked his legs out from under him. His blaster clattered to the ground. They lunged for it at the same time.

"Out of the way, Leia!" Han shouted. "I can't get a clear shot."

Leia and Kiro wrestled for the blaster. Kiro's finger brushed the hilt, but Leia grabbed his wrist just in time, twisting it behind his back. He grunted in pain, shrugging her off with surprising strength. She tumbled backward, but managed to kick the blaster out of his reach as she fell. Then she slammed into the ground, hard. Kiro scrambled forward and snatched the weapon.

## STAR WARS: Hostage

“Leia, go!” Han shouted, taking aim. She climbed to her feet and took a few steps, then, collapsed back to the ground, clutching her ankle. Her face twisted in pain.

Han jerked his head at Luke. “Get her *out* of there.” Luke was already on his way.

Kiro wheeled toward her, his blaster raised, but Chewbacca threw himself in the line of fire. The Wookiee barreled toward Kiro. Grunting with effort, Leia forced herself to her feet and began a limping run. But before Luke could reach her, two figures melted out of the shadow, blasters aimed at his head. He hesitated, giving them the chance they needed to close in on Leia. One of them kept his blaster aimed at Luke, while the other lunged at Leia, jabbing an injector syringe into her shoulder. She lashed out, sinking her fist into his stomach—then sank into his arms with a small sigh.

“Leia!” Han shouted in alarm.

Chewbacca, who had been twisting Kiro into a knot, dropped the man and rushed to help the princess. Using Leia as a shield, the men backed away. One of them raised a comlink to his lips. “Now!” he snapped.

A large speeder truck whooshed down the street, screeching to a halt just long enough for the men to toss Leia inside and hop in after her. They scooped up Kiro’s limp body and sped away. Han took aim—but didn’t shoot. He couldn’t risk causing a crash—not with Leia inside.

The speeder disappeared around a corner.

Luke sank to his knees. “I let her go,” he said, sounding dazed. He unclipped the lightsaber from his belt. “If I’d trusted myself enough to use it...”

“Then you’d probably have gotten yourself killed, kid,” Han said impatiently. They were wasting time. “At least you’re still in one piece. That’ll come in handy when we rescue her.”

“She trusted me,” Luke said, as if Han hadn’t spoken. “I was supposed to protect her.”

## Alex Wheeler

Han ran out of patience. “So do it!” he snapped. “She’s out there somewhere, counting on us to find her.”

Luke stood up, and retrieved his blaster. “You’re right,” he said, with renewed determination. “Let’s find her.”

Chewbacca growled the question that Han had been trying to avoid.

“I don’t *know* how,” Han retorted. “But we *will*.”

He had to.

*I was supposed to protect her*, Luke had said, blaming himself.

*But you weren’t, kid*, Han thought, watching Luke take a few practice swipes with his lightsaber, as if the weapon were good for anything but party tricks. *That was my job*.

The Alderaanians were running out of patience. As the minutes passed, they gathered around Ferus, clamoring for answers.

“You said she’d be here!”

“What kind of game is this?”

“Is this all a big joke to you?”

But Ferus had nothing to give them beyond empty reassurances. He’d been expecting Han and Luke more than twenty minutes ago. Something had obviously gone wrong. But until he received details, there was nothing he could do.

His comlink signaled an incoming transmission.

“It’s me,” Halle Dray’s voice said. “Where are you?”

Ferus stepped away from the crowd. “In my room,” Ferus lied. “Getting ready for tonight.” He knew Halle and her group still thought the meeting was going on as planned. Apparently their leak was less reliable than they’d thought. “What do you need?”

“I just wanted you to hear it from me.”

“Hear what?”

There was a pause, a jumble of voices in the background, and then:

“What am I supposed to say?” Leia’s voice.

“That’ll do quite nicely,” Halle said.

## STAR WARS: Hostage

A poisonous brew of rage and fear began churning in Ferus's gut. "You have the princess," he said, keeping his emotions under tight control. "Congratulations. I thought we weren't moving until tonight."

"And Nahj thought 'we' included *you*," Halle said coldly. "I suspected differently. I see that I was right."

"You set me up," Ferus said, the pieces beginning to fall into place. "You told me about your plans—"

"To see if you'd go running straight to the princess. Which you did." Halle laughed harshly. "Job well done."

She broke the connection.

"Was that the princess?" someone asked. "Is she on her way?"

Ferus couldn't answer.

He'd done it yet again—failed the person he most wanted to protect. And it could have been avoided, had he only paid attention. He'd devoted all his energy to the big picture, getting swept up in questions of Luke and Leia's parentage, their future, the fate of the Empire. He'd lost track of the present, and missed crucial details. If he'd been listening to the Force, he would have heard what was approaching.

But he'd listened to nothing but the drumbeat of his fears for Leia, and he'd let that thunder drown out everything else.

*Not again*, Ferus vowed to himself—to Leia. He'd lost too much.

He wouldn't lose her too.

*Ferus has never felt such a moment of perfect fear. He sees the princess at the top of the crane, seeming so much smaller from so far away. She swings herself onto the catwalk with an easy grace, and he admires the way she fearlessly tiptoes across. Her instincts and reflexes are beyond human. She is strong with the Force, even stronger than he had expected.*

*But she is untrained, and as she scrambles down the scaffolding, he sees her hand slip. Her foot misses its grip. She lets out an alarmed squeal and begins to slide—*

## Alex Wheeler

*Ferus moves with lightning speed, nearly flying up the side of the scaffolding. He catches her.*

*She is angry; she resents his help. But he will not leave her behind, not again. And by the time they are halfway home, she is asleep in his arms.*

*He walks slowly, carefully cradling the snoring bundle in his arms. He has not held her like this since she was a toddler. On the day he first came to Bail Organa to explain his mission, Organa had placed Leia in his arms.*

*Ferus had put her down immediately. How could he remain objective if he let emotions cloud his judgment? The Jedi way repudiated attachments, even to a small child—perhaps especially to a small child. He had turned from that way once, and the consequences had been catastrophic. Never again, he thought.*

*Now he knows he has been a fool.*

*He has denied the truth—and this, too, is not the Jedi way.*

*Leia is not a job. She is a child. And he loves her like she is his own.*

*He has been arguing with Obi-Wan about whether to begin training the Skywalker children as Jedi. Obi-Wan, as always, urges caution. Ferus has his doubts. Shouldn't Luke and Leia be given the chance to explore their gift, to protect themselves?*

*Doesn't the galaxy deserve a new generation of champions?*

*"That's what they have us for," Obi-Wan always says. "Until they're older. Until things change."*

*Until the Emperor is not ruthlessly seeking out and murdering all Force-sensitive children, he means. Until teaching them the ways of the Force is not a death sentence.*

*And, the thought that is on both their minds, though neither will speak it aloud: Until we are sure they will not be like their father.*

*Looking down at Leia, Ferus now understands he will argue no more. Leia might be the key to defeating the Empire—but for now, she is a little girl. Ferus knows he will not risk her safety for anything. Not for the Force, not for the fate of the galaxy. He will save her from the truth about herself, until he knows she is strong enough to survive it. He will always save her.*

*Nothing matters more than that.*



## Chapter Fourteen

She woke up in the back of a large speeder truck, her wrists and ankles bound. J'er Nahj leaned over her, dabbing a drop of blood off her forehead.

"Good," he said softly. "You're all right."

"Hardly," Leia said dryly, struggling into a sitting position.

A man she'd never seen before was at the controls. Kiro Chen lay on a seat just behind him, his head on Halle Dray's lap, his eyes closed. Halle chewed on her lower lip and stroked his hair, never taking her eyes off his face.

Leia was on the floor of the speeder, just behind them, propped up against the back door. If she could find a way to open it and slip out...

"Not a good idea," Nahj said. "At the speed we're going, you'd be killed before you hit the ground. Just sit tight, Your Highness. You'll be all right."

"Don't waste your breath," Halle said. "She's not worth it. Look what her friends did to Kiro!"

"They were just defending themselves," Nahj pointed out. "He'll be fine."

Halle whirled around to glare at Leia. "He better be."

## Alex Wheeler

"He wouldn't be here right now if he hadn't betrayed me," Leia pointed out. She realized this plan must have been a long time in the making. Had Kiro been planning it from the beginning, when he first contacted General Rieekan? Had it all been a trap, designed to snare her? And she'd walked right into it, blind to the possibility that one of her own people could betray her.

"No, he wouldn't be here right now if *you* hadn't betrayed *us*," Halle snapped. "None of us would. You put these events in motion, Princess. Whatever happens next, just remember that."

"Nothing's going to happen," Nahj said. "We won't harm you."

"Don't act like you feel sorry for her! After all the pain she's caused?"

*I've done nothing wrong!* But Leia couldn't say the words out loud.

Beside her, Kiro stirred. "Don't," he murmured.

"It's okay," Halle said, in a soft voice that made her sound like a different person. "They can't hurt you anymore."

"No, I mean, don't yell at her like that. She means well."

Halle shook her head. "You're confused. You don't know what you're saying."

Kiro sat up, shooting Leia an apologetic look. "I'm not confused."

"So you're taking her side now?" Halle asked. "You want to call it off?"

Kiro hesitated, then put an arm around Halle. "No, this is the right move. I trust you on that. But there's no reason to make it harder than it has to be."

Leia's heart thudded. "Make *what* harder?"

"Look at it this way," Halle replied. "You claim you'd do anything to help the survivors of Alderaan?"

"It's not a *claim*," Leia shot back. "It's the truth."

"Then you should be happy to sacrifice yourself for the greater good."

## STAR WARS: Hostage

X-7 was finally alone. Leia's bumbling friends had split up to search for her. X-7 had volunteered to cozy up to Prime Minister Manaa and Deputy Minister Var Lyonn, in case they knew anything. But helping Leia was of no concern to him. All his efforts to break through her guard had proven useless. Maybe with her out of the way, the others would be more forthcoming.

It had been a calculated risk, supporting the princess in her ridiculous plan. Pretending not to see that her new friend Kiro Chen was deceiving her. But his instincts had told him to go along with it, and X-7 relied on them without question. It had been infuriating, watching Chen weasel his way in, gaining her trust with such ease. The only consolation was that X-7 hadn't been the only one shut out. There was no question that the time on Delaya had driven a wedge between Leia and her friends. X-7 had stayed in the background, silent and accepting, in hopes that when the princess turned to someone, she would turn to him. Events hadn't played out in the way he had expected, yet X-7 still expected to turn the situation to his advantage.

If the others found her in time, he would lead the rescue and burrow even deeper into her favor.

If she died, there would be chaos. And when people were panicked, grief-stricken, and confused, it was child's play to get them to do whatever you wanted.

Either way, X-7 had no interest in leading the search. Pretending to be a normal human with normal human emotion was exhausting. And the more he tired himself, the greater chance there was he would make a fatal error.

This was the perfect opportunity for a break.

But just as he was settling into his blissfully blank repose, his comlink activated with an incoming transmission over the secure line. It was the Commander.

"Are you aware that Princess Leia has been kidnapped, and that her captors have plans to hand her over to the Empire?" he asked.

X-7 nodded.

## Alex Wheeler

The Commander's face flushed an angry red. "And are you aware that this has all happened at the command of *the Dark One*?"

Everyone knew it was unsafe to speak Darth Vader's name, even over an encrypted channel. But the Commander's meaning was clear.

"I was not aware."

The Commander bared his teeth in the predatory grimace of a rancor ready to strike. "Are you aware that the Dark One has made it a top priority to track down the pilot who destroyed the Death Star? That he might be on his way to Delaya as we speak, to personally supervise the interrogation?"

"I was not aware."

The Commander's rage exploded. "*Are you aware of anything, you bantha-brained bludfly?*"

X-7 swallowed hard.

"You will find Leia before his men can interrogate her," the Commander ordered. "*You* will interrogate her, and you will find the answers we seek. Enough delay! Get the job done, X-7. Or suffer the consequences."

No one at the warehouses would speak to them. At least, not about J'er Nahj, Halle Dray, or Kiro Chen. Leia was merely an outsider. Princess of a planet that no longer existed. Neither Luke nor Han could convince them of anything else.

Fess had come up empty as well. He'd checked all the meeting spots used by Nahj and Halle's group, but there was no sign of any of them.

"You couldn't have known," Luke kept assuring him. "This isn't your fault." Fess didn't seem convinced.

"It's not your fault either, kid," Han reminded Luke. Han suspected he was blaming himself for keeping quiet about Nahj's little kidnapping habit. Sure, he'd made a mistake trusting Nahj. But then, Han had made a mistake trusting Kiro Chen. They all had. And now Leia was paying for it.

## STAR WARS: Hostage

Leia had been gone for three hours, and they were no closer to finding her.

They were trudging through a narrow alley on their way back to their quarters when Han stopped abruptly.

“What?” Luke asked. Han shushed him, listening hard. Fess caught his eye and nodded. He’d heard it, too. Fess pointed toward a side alley that led to a dead end. Han led them in, giving Chewbacca a silent signal to hang back. Luke looked confused, but he followed along.

They’d made it almost to the end of the alley when Han spun around, his blaster raised and ready to fire. “You want to come out, whoever you are?”

Nothing happened.

Chewbacca positioned himself at the other end of the alley, blocking the way of anyone who might try to escape.

“We don’t have time for this,” Luke complained.

“He’s there,” Fess said with an odd certainty. “You’ve got nothing to fear from us!”

Han rolled his eyes. That wasn’t exactly the message he would have sent to a shadowy figure following him into a dark alley. But it had become clear the old man liked to do things his own way. Han played along, lowering the blaster. “Yeah, come on out, or stop wasting my time.”

There was a flicker of movement behind one of the towering piles of garbage. It was the kid, Mazi. This time, he was alone.

Han sighed. He didn’t have time to play babysitter.

“You know something,” Fess said. It wasn’t a question.

Mazi shrugged. “Hear you been looking around for Halle.”

“You know where she is?” Luke asked.

Mazi shrugged again.

“Tell us!” Luke shouted.

Fess shot Luke a sharp glance.

“Let me handle this,” Han said. He tapped the pocket where he kept his credits. “How much you want, kid?”

“Didn’t come here looking for a payday,” Mazi mumbled.

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"Then what?" Again, Han wondered how long this kid would last on the streets. Rule number one: Someone offers you cash, you take it.

Mazi shifted his weight. "I met Princess Leia once, you know? School trip to the palace. Dead boring. But she was nice and all."

"Nice, huh?" Han grinned. "Not the first word that comes to mind."

"There's this place Halle and Kiro go when they want to be alone," Mazi said. "This abandoned schoolhouse, a few blocks up the river. They think it's like this big romantic secret or something that they're together. Usually pretend they don't even know each other."

"So how come you know?" Han asked.

"I know a lot of stuff," Mazi said. "It's easy to be invisible, when you want to be."

"And sometimes when you don't," Han said quietly.

"Whatever. Anyway, that's all I got." He turned to leave.

"Wait." Han pulled out a handful of credits.

"I told you, I didn't come here for that."

Han shoved the money into his hand. "Just take it, kid."

Mazi grabbed the credits and ran off.

"What are you all looking at?" Han asked, realizing Fess and Luke were staring at him.

"You were rather good with him, Captain Solo," Fess said. "I wouldn't have guessed."

Chewbacca barked in agreement.

"He just reminds me of someone," Han mumbled. He brushed past the others, heading out of the alley. "Now can we stop wasting time and go find Leia?"

They charged down the street, seeking out the building that Mazi had described. "Stay strong, Your Highness," Han heard Fess murmur. "We're on our way."

## Chapter Fifteen

*Stay strong, Your Highness. We're on our way.*

It wasn't a voice in her head. It was just a feeling, a moment of calm and confidence. As if Luke was there with her, lending her some of that infuriating certainty that right would prevail. She stared blankly at the wall of her dim cell, trying to picture Luke's face.

But it wasn't Luke's face she saw, it was Fess's.

"You're sure we can trust them?" Nahj's voice carried through the narrow gap between the ceiling and the door.

"We're not giving them the prisoner until we get evidence that they're serious about resettlement," Halle said.

"Unless they decide to come and *take* her," Nahj pointed out.

"The Empire doesn't know where we're holding her," Kiro said. "Halle thought of everything."

"The man I've been dealing with reports directly to his Lordship Darth Vader," Halle boasted. "This is a done deal. You know Vader has the authority to make it happen."

"I've heard he can make *anything* happen," Nahj muttered. "That's what concerns me."

Whatever brief spurt of confidence Leia had felt was gone. All with a single word: *Vader*. She'd faced him before, and that

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was enough for one lifetime. If her friends really were coming to rescue her, they'd better hurry.

*So you're just going to sit around and wait, Your Highness? Giving up that easy?*

This time, the voice was in her head—cool, mocking, and completely her imagination.

*I didn't realize you were such a pushover, Your Majesty.* She could almost picture Han's crooked smile, goading her on. *I know you royal folk are used to having everything done for you, so this may come as a surprise: Some of us rescue ourselves.*

And, as so often happened when faced with Han's gundark-headed taunts, she couldn't help herself. She smiled.

*Who's giving up?* she asked the imaginary Han.

Halle Dray had told her she deserved this. That if she truly loved Alderaan, she'd be willing to give her life for its revival.

*Whatever I've done, it's not Halle Dray's job to punish me,* Leia thought. Sacrificing herself to the Emperor was no way to honor the billions who'd died at his hand.

She'd barely looked at her cell, but now she scrutinized it, her mind racing, frantically searching for options. The room was only four or five meters wide, with four blank walls and a single locked durasteel door. The cheap flooring tiles sagged beneath her. The floor bulged in one corner, the plasteel tiles peeling up at the edges as if something lay beneath.

Leia got on her hands and knees and dug her fingers into one of the peeling tiles, trying to pry it up. She grunted in pain as two of her nails broke off, but she kept scrabbling at the scuffed plasteel.

The tile popped off. The one next to it lifted off easily, and the next, and the next, until Leia had uncovered a narrow grate over a dark shaft. Some kind of old heating vent, perhaps, or an air duct.

Or an escape route. Leia unscrewed the grate and eased herself into the opening. It was just large enough for her to squeeze through. She didn't pause to consider where the dark



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tunnel might lead—it was away from the cell. And for now, that would have to be enough.

The air shaft was dank and slimy. Leia dropped down several meters, landing hard as the shaft flattened out. She slithered on her stomach as the shaft sagged beneath her weight. It was holding...for now.

The shaft began to climb. As it grew steeper, Leia braced her feet against its sides to keep herself from sliding backward. She inched up the slope, using her legs to push herself forward. It was grueling and maddeningly slow—and then, abruptly, the shaft leveled off again. Light filtered up through a grate, illuminating the wall that lay before her. She'd hit a dead end.

The grate lifted off easily. Leia peered through the opening. She looked down—way down—on a wide, empty room, scattered with piles of durasteel girders and abandoned scaffolding. Her captors must have brought her to one of the abandoned construction sites scattering the city. Now she was suspended at least thirty meters above a duracrete floor.

A thin crane climbed toward the ceiling, several meters below and to the left. If she could propel herself from the grate at just the right angle, with enough momentum, she might be able to grab it. *Might.*

And then, if she didn't miss her grip and go plummeting to her death, she might be able to climb down.

*Might.*

Leia lowered herself down, feet first, holding so tight to the edge that her knuckles turned white. Then she began to swing her legs back and forth, building up momentum.

*Scared, Your Worship?* Han's voice taunted, as she hesitated. *Maybe if you wait long enough, someone will build you a royal turbolift.*

*Get out of my head!* Leia silently shouted and, with a deep breath, swung herself forward and let go.

For a moment, she was flying, arms outstretched.

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She slammed into the crane. Her head thudded against the durasteel with a dull clang. She could taste blood dripping from a split lip. But she was alive.

Leia wrapped her arms around the crane, hugging it to her chest, her feet scrabbling for purchase. *One miracle down*, she thought, trying not to look at the all-too-distant ground. *One to go*.

She felt no fear. There was something familiar about the cold durasteel of the crane against her skin, the dizzy-ing height. Thin ridges jutted out at regular intervals along the mast of the crane, and she was able to climb down without much difficulty—until she got overconfident. The next foothold she reached for wasn't there, her fingers slipped their grip, and suddenly she was hurtling toward the ground.

Instinct took over. Her arm shot out, grabbing for the scaffolding at the exact moment it flew past. She made contact. Her shoulder nearly tore out of its socket, but she held on, dangling by one arm, fifteen meters above the ground. A narrow catwalk stretched above her. She need only pull herself up and climb down.

*Unbelievable*, she thought in wonder. Grabbing hold of that scaffolding at the right instant had been an incredibly lucky one-in-a-hundred shot.

And then the bar from which she hung gave out. As it snapped free of the scaffolding, she reached desperately for the edge of the catwalk. She caught herself just in time, hanging by her fingertips. But the bar tumbled to the floor, crashing into a pile of durasteel girders with an echoing clang that seemed to shake the building.

She heard a shout, then footsteps, running toward her.

With the last of her strength, Leia swung herself up onto the catwalk. But it was too late. But the time she'd regained her footing, Halle's men had arrived. Three of them, blasters aimed.

"Get her down from there," Halle ordered her men. "Then bring her back with us so we can keep an eye on her. Just in case she's stupid enough to try this again."

## Chapter Sixteen

Sorry about all this,” Kiro murmured, as he fastened her restraints. Leia pretended not to hear.

Halle Dray stood before her, clapping slowly. “Impressive,” she jeered. “Not what I would have expected from a coddled member of the royal family.”

Leia glared at her captor. “My father never coddled me,” she said in an even voice. “He showed me how to stand on my own. To *fight*.”

Halle perched on the edge of a durasteel girder, bringing her face level with Leia’s. “Yes, your father knew plenty about fighting, didn’t he? Alderaan was a peace-loving planet, but that wasn’t good enough for him, was it? He needed the glory of battle. Even if it meant turning his planet into an enemy of the Empire. Even if it meant destroying us all.”

*Enough.* Let them accuse her all they wanted—but there was no way Leia would let them attack her father.

“My father *loved* Alderaan,” she snarled.

Halle shook her head. “No. He loved the glory of war.”

It was Leia who had first urged her father to join the Rebellion. Leia who had fought for Alderaan to take up arms

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after so many years of peace. *Will you be the one to bring war to us?* he had once asked.

But in the end, he had agreed.

"The people of Alderaan believed in my father," Leia insisted.

"The people,' taken as a whole, are almost always reckless and stupid," Halle snapped. "You and your father preyed on their foolishness. You re-armed a planet that had turned its back on violence. You linked it with the Rebel Alliance. And you—yes, *you*, Princess Leia—you gave the Emperor the final excuse he needed."

Leia heard Grand Moff Tarkin's voice, as she heard it in her nightmares. *In a way, you have determined the choice of the planet that will be destroyed first.*

"No!" she shouted. Halle could blather on as much as she wanted. But Leia needed to silence the voice in her head. "I'm proud of everything I've done. Can you—any of you—say the same?"

Kiro and Nahj both looked away, shame tingeing their expressions. But Halle was uncowed. "I've done only what I need to do. Sacrifices are always necessary for the greater good."

"No good can come of cooperating with the Empire," Leia protested. She turned her gaze toward Kiro. He'd been working on behalf of the Alliance for weeks—yes, it had all been an act, but he seemed so apologetic now. Wasn't there a chance that some small part of him believed in her? If she could persuade him..."The Empire is *evil*, you must see that after what they've done. There can be no good in the galaxy until the Empire is destroyed. This is why we fight. Why we *must* fight."

Kiro cleared his throat. "Halle, maybe..."

"Kiro, get my medpac and find something to tend to the prisoner's wounds," Halle ordered. "I'm sure Vader's men expect to find her in good condition."

"But—"

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"Kiro, now!" Halle snapped. Then she drew in a slow breath, calming herself. She stood up, grasping his wrists and bringing her face close to his. "You know this is right," she said in a low voice. "I need you to believe in me."

Kiro hesitated, his eyes darting to Leia. Then he gave Halle a soft kiss on the forehead. "Always," he promised her.

There was a storage area off to Leia's right. Halle waited for Kiro to disappear through the door before she spoke again.

"Don't you *dare* try to use him against me," Halle warned Leia. "He'll never betray me."

Ignoring the pain, Leia drew her bloodied lips back in the approximation of a smile. "Some people will do whatever's necessary for the greater good."

"Halle, they're here!" J'er Nahj cried, before she could respond. Four Imperial stormtroopers clomped toward them, their heavy boots slapping the floor in lockstep. Behind them appeared a slim, gray-haired man.

Halle flipped open her comlink. "Driscoll, you were supposed to alert me if the Imperials arrived. Driscoll? Trey? Hello?" No response.

"I'm afraid your friends have other things to worry about," the man said. "You'd best worry about yourself. Halle Dray, I assume?"

She nodded. "How did you find us?"

"That's my job," the officer said. "No one can hide from the Empire."

Halle didn't flinch. "Have you brought the plans for the New Alderaan resettlement?"

The Imperial officer shook his head.

"The terms of our agreement were that you would get the prisoner only once the Empire begins relocating the refugees."

"The terms have been changed." He signaled the stormtroopers. As one, they raised their blasters and fired.

The laserbolts struck Halle Dray and J'er Nahj at the same moment. Both were direct hits.

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It seemed like their bodies collapsed to the floor in slow motion. Leia forced herself not to look away. *Remember this*, she ordered herself, staring hard at their limp, pale limbs, at the scorch marks across their chests. At their sightless eyes, wide open, gazing blankly into the void. *Remember every life the Empire has taken.*

Halle and Nahj had been her captors. But they had also been her people.

*Remember—then avenge.*

"There's supposed to be a third," the Imperial said, kicking each of the bodies to make sure they were dead. "*Find him.*"

Leia glanced toward the storage area, and saw Kiro's eyes peering out of the darkness. He was at her mercy.

"The third one ran off shortly before you arrived," she told the Imperial. "The sniveling coward couldn't take the pressure."

He raised his eyebrows. "Your help in the matter is rather unexpected, Princess."

"You and I may be on opposite sides," Leia said, trying to sound as cold and unfeeling as him. "But we certainly agree that this scum deserves to die."

The Imperial nodded to the stormtroopers. "TB-278, TB-137, see if you can track him down. TB-31 and TB-2954, take her back to the temporary base and see she's prepared for interrogation. I'll alert Lord Vader of our progress." He swept his eyes across her body, staring so intently it was almost like he could see inside of her. She forced herself not to cringe. "I doubt I'll be seeing you again, Your Highness. Not alive, at least."

He spun on his heel and walked away.

As the stormtroopers carried her from the room, she arched her head back, and saw Kiro poke his head out of the shadows. He took a step toward her, a question on his face. Leia gave her head a slight shake. *Run*, she mouthed.

He hesitated, his eyes wide and anguished. *Run!* she urged him again.

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He couldn't save her. But he could save himself. And no matter what he'd done, he was still one of her subjects. Which meant he was her responsibility.

Kiro nodded, once, then slipped back into the shadows. As the stormtroopers carried her away, she felt a faint whisper of relief.

*At least one of us will escape.*

## Chapter Seventeen

There's no one here," Luke said, once they'd conducted a cursory search of the hollowed-out school building. Its rust red paint was peeling off the walls, and crushed transparisteel glittered on the floor. A few tattered drawings still fluttered on the wall, leftovers from an unimaginable past. It had taken them far too long to track down the building. And now, after all that wasted time, there was nothing. "Let's go—maybe Han found something in the other wing."

*He's too impatient,* Ferus thought. *So eager to move onto the next thing that he misses what's right in front of him.* It wasn't untypical for a Padawan, but then, Luke wasn't a Padawan. He had no Master to show him a better way.

*He could have me.*

"Wait," Ferus said, stretching out with the Force. They were not alone.

"Wait for *what*?" Luke asked, annoyed. "You stay if you want. I'm leaving."

That's when Ferus heard it. A distant, muffled moaning. "Come on." Ferus hurried toward the source of the sound, without bothering to see if Luke would follow. He crept into one of the empty classrooms, crossing to a desk in the back of the



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room. Kiro Chen lay curled up underneath, hugging his arms to his chest. Weeping.

Ferus touched the man's shoulder. He didn't react. "Kiro."

Kiro looked up at him with blank, wild eyes. "They killed her! They killed her, and I didn't know where else to go. It wasn't supposed to be this way."

*Surely I would know if she was dead*, Ferus assured himself. *I would sense it.*

"Leia?" Luke said, his voice cracking on the name. "They killed Leia?"

Kiro shuddered, and buried his face in his hands. "I loved her. It wasn't supposed to be this way. It wasn't."

"Halle?" Ferus guessed softly. Regret mixed with relief.

Kiro groaned. "Dead."

Ferus took Kiro by the shoulders and, gently, pulled him out from under the desk. Kiro didn't resist as Ferus guided him to a chair.

"Tell us where they are," Luke urged him. "Where did you take Leia?"

Tears streamed down Kiro's face. "I lost everyone. Everything. And then I found her—and they took her from me, too."

Ferus nodded. "It is a tragic loss, Kiro, and I'm sorry—"

"*Sorry?*" Luke repeated incredulously. "He kidnapped Leia. And now he's the only one who knows where to find her." He grabbed Kiro by the shoulders, shaking him roughly. "Where is she? *Where?*"

Kiro choked on his sobs, sucking in air like he couldn't get enough to breathe.

"Answer me!" Luke shouted.

*There's so much anger in him*, Ferus thought.

Luke's hand strayed toward his lightsaber.

*Enough*, Ferus thought in alarm. He grabbed Luke's wrist. "No," he said firmly. "This is not the way."

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Rage filled Luke's eyes and, for a moment, Ferus feared he was about to strike. But instead, he dropped his arm back to his side. "I wasn't going to hurt him."

"I know," Ferus assured him.

This was a lie.

"He knows where she is," Luke said desperately. "He knows, and he won't tell us."

"Because he can't tell us. Not like this." Ferus knelt by Kiro's side, placing a comforting hand on the man's shoulder. Kiro shuddered beneath his touch. "Anger is never the answer," he told Luke. "Whatever you gain from it never makes up for what you lose."

Luke nodded.

*But does he really understand? Ferus thought. Or is he just pretending, the way Anakin used to? Biding his time?*

Ferus reminded himself that these were extreme circumstances. He understood Luke's desperation, because he shared it.

He shut his doubts out of his mind and let the Force flow through him. He didn't suppress his fear, he embraced it, accepted it as a necessary reaction to events, then let it go. He imagined himself as the eye of the storm, peaceful and serene, then let that calm flow through his body and into Kiro Chen. "Your loss has been great, my friend. Your sorrow beyond measure," he said soothingly, letting his voice rise and fall like the lapping river. The words weren't as important as the emotion they carried. Ferus could sense that Kiro was a good man. He wanted to help. But he was locked inside his grief. "You think your life is empty. Frozen, because how can it move forward? How can it survive this? How can *you*?"

As he spoke, Ferus allowed himself to remember all the losses he'd tried too hard to forget. The names and faces who haunted his nightmares. "But you *did* survive," he said. "And by accepting that, you honor her sacrifice."

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"It wasn't her fault," Kiro said. "She did what she thought was right. I tried to talk her out of it, but she never listened to anyone. She was always so certain, and this time..."

"If you don't help us, more will die," Ferus said quietly. "Princess Leia will die."

Kiro took a deep, shuddering breath. "I don't know where the Imperials took her."

Ferus exchanged a glance with Luke. The same hopeless frustration was painted across both their faces.

Until Kiro spoke again. "But I know someone who will."

Deputy Minister Var Lyonn liked to work late. And he liked to work alone. It meant he could focus on his tasks without any distractions. It also meant that when two men blasted through his office door, then aimed their weapons at his head, there was no one to hear him scream.

He screamed quite a bit.

"Give it a rest," Han snapped. Time was running out. And he was getting a headache. "We're not here to kill you."

Lyonn reached for a switch on the corner of his desk. A laserbolt shot across the room, blowing a hole in the expensive wood. Lyonn yanked his hand back. "No need to call in reinforcements," Fess said calmly. "You'll be gone by the time they get here."

"And just where am I going?" Lyonn said, trying and failing to sound like he was in control of himself or anything else.

"You're going to take us to wherever the Empire has stashed the princess."

Var Lyonn went white. "The princess is...missing?"

"She is," Fess said. "Thanks in part to you."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Another laserbolt whizzed by, this one blasting a hole in the wall just behind Lyonn's left ear. "Try again," Fess growled.

"You can't blame me!" Var Lyonn squeaked. "I had to do what was best for Delaya! We have enough problems of our

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own, without all these survivors sapping our resources. The Empire promised to help!”

“In return for giving them Leia.” Han was glad that they’d agreed Fess would do all the blasting. Han would have been too tempted to blow a hole straight through this skrag. “So you did it. And now you’re going to help us get her back.”

## Chapter Eighteen

There were no Imperial guards posted outside the deserted medcenter, but the place had a sinister feel. Maybe it was the boarded up windows, or the sentry droids hovering at the perimeter, but Han was certain this was the place.

You only needed to look at Var Lyonn to know he'd told the truth. He stood at the lone entrance of the medcenter, legs trembling, sweat bleeding through his shirt. He banged on the door again. "Let me in!" he shouted in a high, quivering voice.

"Stop shaking!" Han hissed from his hiding place in the bushes. "If they suspect you've betrayed them, they'll kill you."

"Is that supposed to make him feel *better*?" Luke asked.

Fess shushed them both.

With the addition of Elad, there were five of them. Although Luke was still hit-or-miss with a blaster, and the old man was...well, an old man. Then there were the droids, who Han refused to count at all. If Lyonn could get them inside, it just might be enough—or not. They had no idea how many Imperials they were facing, or where Leia was being held. More time might have allowed them to make a better plan.

But who knew how much time Leia had left?

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The door slid open. Two stormtroopers stood in the entrance.

“Just a few more steps, fellas,” Han muttered, waiting impatiently for a clear shot. Lyonn was supposed to get the guards to step out of the building. Han and Luke would take them down, then don their armor. Dressed as stormtroopers, they’d infiltrate the facility, find the princess, and get her out. It was a crazy plan—but it had worked before.

Mostly.

“I need to see your lieutenant,” Lyonn said loudly. Then he leaned toward the stormtroopers, saying something Han was too far away to hear.

“Blast it!” Han swore. “I knew this would happen.”

“What?” Luke asked, just as one of the stormtroopers raised his comlink. The other raised a blaster, taking aim for the bushes.

“Go!” Han shouted. They scattered. A barrage of laserbolts slammed into the foliage, sending billowing plumes of dirt into the air. Han darted through the cloud, firing at one of the stormtroopers. He went down.

“Watch out!” Luke shouted, knocking Han out of the way just in time to avoid another laserbolt which whizzed past.

Chewbacca roared, charging the door with his Ryk blade held high. The stormtrooper fired wildly, sending a blast straight into Var Lyonn, who shrieked and dropped to the ground. Before the stormtrooper could reload, Chewbacca had grabbed his blaster and twisted it out of his hands—then he set to work twisting the stormtrooper.

“Oh dear, Artoo, where do you think you’re going?” C-3PO cried from his hiding spot. But the little astromech droid ignored him, rolling steadily toward the door. He positioned himself in its path, just as it was sliding shut.

C-3PO dodged the laserbolts flying all around him to join his stubborn counterpart. “You simply must get out of there,” he insisted. “You’re a droid, not a doorstop.”

R2-D2 beeped indignantly.

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“Why I’m most certainly doing something to help,” C-3PO protested. “I’m offering my opinion on how things should proceed.” He turned toward the battle, shaking his golden arms in the air. “Uh, I suggest you shoot at that stormtrooper, Captain Solo. Oh, dear, Master Luke, you might want to get out of the way!”

“Stop wasting my time and let’s go find the princess!” Han shouted, knocking out the last stormtrooper. The melted, carbon-scored plastel armor would be no use as a disguise now. But that likely didn’t matter, since the stormtroopers had called for reinforcements. They’d lost the element of surprise.

He vaulted over R2-D2 and sailed through the open door. “Good job, little guy,” he called back to the droid, as the others hurtled through the opening.

“Why, thank you, sir,” C-3PO answered for both of them. “We live to serve.”

“Find the nearest computer terminal,” Han ordered the droids. “See if you can get some information for us.” But he didn’t have much hope. If the Imperials were just using this as a temporary base, there was little chance they’d upload the location of their prisoner into the computer system. Still, he’d try anything. He could already hear the drumbeat of armored boots thudding down the hall, straight for them. Things were about to get very dangerous, very fast.

They strapped her to a flat slab of durasteel. Leia didn’t struggle—she didn’t want to waste her strength. She suspected she would need everything she had for what was to come.

She had been tortured before, and survived.

Even if there were moments when, torn apart by the pain, she’d wished that she hadn’t.

Stun cuffs pinned her wrists and ankles to the durasteel. The stormtroopers snapped another set of binders across her chest, her waist, and her neck. She was completely immobilized.

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*No fear*, she reminded herself.

Whatever they did to her, she would never betray the Rebel Alliance. *Never*.

Once she was immobilized, the stormtroopers marched out, their feet pounding the floor in unison. She was left in a silence broken only by her ragged breathing.

Then, footsteps. A Pau'an, with a gaunt, gray face, clawed hands, and a long black robe. He smiled. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Princess Leia."

She spit in his face.

The Pau'an jerked away, swiping the gob of saliva away with the back of his hand. She allowed herself a small moment of satisfaction.

"You'll tell me what I want to know, Princess," the Pau'an said in a pinched voice.

"I'm surprised to see a Pau'an working for the Emperor," Leia replied calmly, as if they were having a polite chat. "Given that he's turned your world into a planet of Imperial slaves."

"Not slaves, Your Highness," the alien hissed. "Willing servants of our Imperial masters. True, the Emperor prefers to fill out his ranks with human officers...but some of you humans tend to get rather squeamish about torture. Whereas I'll do anything to get the information I desire. And, just between you and me—I'll enjoy it."

The binder restraining her neck was tight enough that she couldn't turn her head. So she closed her eyes. Rough thumbs pressed against her lids, dragging them open. "Look at me," he ordered.

As if she had a choice.

"First: The name of the pilot who destroyed the Death Star. Next: Everything you know about the Rebel Alliance. *Everything*."

"I'm not telling you anything, scum," Leia spit out. "Do whatever you want. You can't make me talk."

"Incorrect." The Pau'an pulled a thick black handle out of his cloak. A thin strand of wire dangled from one end; he brushed it



across her face. "Have you ever seen a Neuronic whip, Princess? With the press of a switch, a high voltage charge of electricity will shoot through this wire—and into anything it touches."

He glided the whip across her cheekbone...down her jawline...his finger straying toward the activation switch. Leia tried not to flinch. "One lash is enough to cause debilitating pain, neurological overload. Repeated lashings usually result in permanent brain damage. Very useful on my planet for keeping the slaves in line."

"I thought you said they were willing servants," Leia said through gritted teeth.

"At a certain point, one is *willing* to do anything to make the pain stop," he said coldly. "Do you know much about pain, Princess?"

*More than you can imagine, you Imperial slime.*

He bared his teeth, and moved the whip beyond her field of vision. A moment later, she felt the cold wire brush her neck. "So many kinds of pain." He traced invisible designs in her skin. "Infinite variations." She forced herself not to shiver as the wire ran across her forehead, her temple, over her lips, along her chin. If he activated the charge...

"How much pain can you handle?" he asked "How much before you break?"

"I'll never break," she snapped. *No fear*, she told herself again. It should have helped, the knowledge that she'd been tortured before and knew what was coming. She'd carved out a dark, quiet space for herself in the corner of her mind, and curled up until the pain disappeared. But even when the pain had gone, it hadn't been easy to find her way out again. If she had to retreat into the shadows once again, would she ever find her way back?

Still: "Do what you want," she said coldly. "You'll get nothing from me."

"I know," he said abruptly, dropping the whip. It clattered to the floor. "You'll break," he said. "Everyone breaks. Even the strongest have their limits. It's only a matter of how much. Pain

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will destroy you—either your body, or your mind. I could hurt you, Princess.” He leaned over her face, his breath misting her forehead. “I could hurt you quite efficiently.”

He let out a hissing sigh of irritation. “But I’ve seen your file. You’d die before you talked—or the pain would drive you to madness, trapping you inside your head forever. You’d be of no use to us then. Fortunately, I’ve been provided with a third option.”

Once again, he held something over her face for her to see. An injector. “One dose of this, and you’ll tell me anything I want to know,” he boasted. “It bores holes in your brain, burrowing straight through all those troublesome little walls you’ve erected around the truth. No more secrets, Princess. Not from me, and not from the Empire.”

Now Leia knew that she hadn’t been afraid before, not really.

Because this was fear. Ice pulsing through her veins. Not for herself, not for her own life—but for the Alliance. If the Empire could get inside her brain, they could learn anything.

Names. Bases. Access codes.

All her friends would be in danger, their hopes destroyed.

All because of her. Again.

“Look on the bright side,” he said, smirking down at her. “The serum is in the experimental stage—we’re still refining the formula.”

*So maybe it won’t work*, Leia thought desperately.

“Oh, it gets the job done,” the Pau’an said pleasantly. “But only one of our test subjects has survived. She’s doing a lot better these days—at least according to the poor sap we pay to mop up her drool. I’m told soon she might even be allowed to feed herself again, if they can teach her to stop stabbing herself in the face with the fork.” He shrugged. “Either way, once we’re done here, I doubt you’ll be in any position to feel guilty about the secrets you’ve revealed.”

Leia felt herself beginning to crumble. She’d always believed she could fight anything.

## STAR WARS: Hostage

But what if she couldn't fight this?

*I'm sorry*, she said silently, to all the men and women she'd promised to protect. To the survivors on Delaya. To the Rebel Alliance. To Luke, to Han. To her father.

To Alderaan.

"Ready?" The Pau'an drew the injector and pressed it to the back of her neck.

But before he could inject her, an alarm ripped through the silence.

His comlink blared. "Intruders!" the tinny voice announced. "Institute emergency protocol!"

The man scowled, laying the injector next to Leia's body. "I'll be back, Your Highness."

"Back from the dead?" Leia snarled, drawing strength from the blaring alarm. Someone had come for her. She wasn't the kind of woman who liked to be rescued.

But it was far better than the alternative.

## Chapter Nineteen

Ferus dodged a laser blast and threw himself across the hall, slamming into the stormtrooper. He jerked his blaster over his head, smashing it into the trooper's plastoid face plate. With the help of the Force, the blow sent the stormtrooper reeling. Ferus waited for a clear shot, then fired.

His Jedi training gave him an advantage over the enemy. His senses were honed, his motions carefully chosen and lightning quick. As he battled through the crush of stormtroopers, time slowed for him. The Force alerted him when the enemy was set to strike. He darted out of the way an instant before the laserfire could hit its mark, and fought with an acrobatic grace.

Still, he was clumsy with a blaster. With his lightsaber, he could likely have taken out the stormtroopers all on his own. What was the point of keeping his identity a secret if it got them all killed?

Luke wasn't using his lightsaber either, Ferus noted. The boy was good with a blaster, but his hand kept straying to the lightsaber's hilt, as if he were resisting the temptation to activate it.

*He's afraid of failure, Ferus thought. He's afraid to try.*

## STAR WARS: Hostage

They battled their way down a long hallway, leaving a trail of armored bodies behind them. Ahead of them, the hall branched off in two directions. More stormtroopers approached from behind.

“Chewie, you search that hall, Luke and I’ll take this one,” Han shouted, signaling for Elad and Ferus to cover them as they rounded the corner.

Two was almost more effective than five in the narrow hallway. Elad seemed to anticipate Ferus’s motions, ducking and weaving out of the way, his shots perfectly timed with Ferus’s. *He fights like a Jedi*, Ferus thought.

The stormtroopers surged forward, their boots pounding the ground in lockstep. The air blazed with laser fire. “This isn’t working,” Elad shouted over the noise. “We need to push back.”

Ferus got his meaning. The stormtroopers were advancing toward the end of the hallway—any further, and they’d be able to turn the corner and take off after Han and Luke. He and Elad would have to force them back down to the other end of the hall, and hold them there as long as possible.

Ferus knew he could pull out his lightsaber and dispatch the guards within minutes. But if there was any other way...

“In there!” Ferus said suddenly, jerked his head toward one of the open doors along the corridor.

“Run and hide?” Elad asked in disgust, dodging another blast. The hallway was filling up with a smoke so thick they could barely see the enemy.

“Neither,” Ferus shot back. He pointed at the large cart just inside the storage closet, piled with medical equipment. Elad glanced over, eyebrows raised. Then he nodded, and darted inside. The stormtroopers fell back as Ferus peppered the hallway with laserfire. He drew on the Force to guide his aim, and the stormtroopers dropped, one by one. But there were still too many of them.

“Ready?” Elad said, pulling the cart out of the closet.

## Alex Wheeler

Ferus climbed on top, shifting his balance as Elad began to push. The cart gained momentum, plowing toward the stormtroopers.

They couldn't hit a moving target. Especially one towering several feet over their heads, speeding down the hallway right for them. Ferus bounced on the balls of his feet, trying to maintain his balance as the cart hurtled down the hallway, straight into the ranks of the enemy. The high vantage point gave him a perfect shot. Blast after blast hit its mark, until the corridor was littered with armored bodies. Shielded by the cart, Elad took down his fair share of stormtroopers, blasting with one hand as he pushed Ferus down the hall. He seemed to be shooting blindly, and yet nearly every blast made contact.

Soon only three stormtroopers were still standing. "Retreat!" one of them ordered. In unison, they darted to the edges of the corridor, sheltering themselves behind a series of open doors. Every few seconds, one would peek out just long enough to spray the hall with laserfire then duck back to safety.

Ferus hopped off the cart, feeling a surge of relief. Two against twenty had been daunting odds. Two against three? Even a Padawan could handle that.

But the thought of Padawans made him think of Luke and Leia, and he remembered they were still no closer to rescuing the princess than they'd been before. The relief vanished.

"Cover me," Elad suddenly shouted, dropping to the floor over the body of a fallen stormtrooper. Ferus stood over him, blasting away at the stormtroopers who were left.

Elad ripped off the stormtrooper's armor and dug his fingers into the man's shoulder. He shrieked with pain.

It was a hand-to-hand combat tactic Ferus had never tried: a precise compression of the parascapular nerve that caused unbearable pain. The rare maneuver had been perfected centuries before, but Ferus had seen it performed only once, by an Imperial officer trying to torture information out of a spice

## STAR WARS: Hostage

smuggler. The officer's expression had been no more single-mindedly brutal than Tobin Elad's.

*This is different*, Ferus told himself, trying to block out the stormtrooper's agonized cries. *Our cause is just. We have no choice.*

But another, fainter voice drifted through his troubled mind, resonating with Jedi-like assurance. *There is always a choice.*

"Where is the prisoner?" Elad asked. The stormtrooper just screamed. Ferus winced as the man's pain rippled through the Force. Elad just pressed harder. "*Where is she?*"

"Hallway on the right," the stormtrooper moaned. "Third door down."

"That better be the truth," Elad warned him. "Because if she's not there, I'm coming back for you. My friend here is going to leave you alive for me."

"It's true!" the stormtrooper screamed, writhing in pain. "I swear!"

"Enough!" Ferus shouted. "I'll hold them off—you go find Leia. Go!"

Elad didn't hesitate. He took off down the hallway.

Ferus activated his lightsaber, and advanced toward the remaining stormtroopers. When they saw he'd dropped the blaster, they abandoned their hiding places and rushed him. Time slowed to a crawl. He struck out with the lightsaber, once, twice, thrusting its glowing blade into the nearest stormtrooper. He somersaulted through the air, dodging the man's fallen body, and deflected a blast of laserfire. The blue beam swooped and swirled, carving elaborate arcs through the air.

A Jedi never craves violence, never enjoys it.

But Ferus's lightsaber had sat hidden and unused for a long time. Wielding it again, finally taking *action* instead of just sitting around and endlessly watching, waiting...it felt like coming home.

## Alex Wheeler

X-7 raced down the hall, pausing to look back just before he turned the corner. Out of curiosity, not concern. Was the fool already dead?

Two bodies lay on the floor, both of them stormtroopers. And between the two still on their feet, was Fess. But a different Fess than X-7 had seen before. He was leaping nimbly away from the blaster shots, with a dancer's liquid grace. He moved so fast that he almost seemed to be in two or three places at once.

But that wasn't the strangest thing.

The strangest thing was the glowing blue blade slashing through the air, deflecting laserbolts, spiraling toward the stormtroopers and effortlessly slicing through their armor.

So Fess, whoever he was, had a lightsaber. A carefully hidden lightsaber. And, unlike Luke, he seemed to know how to use it.

Interesting.

But not relevant. X-7 filed the information away for later use. He rushed down the hallway. As he neared the third door down, a gaunt, gray alien approached from the other end of the hallway. He drew an oddly shaped weapon from his cloak, some kind of whip. X-7 simply blasted a hole through his head. Then, stepping over the dead body, Elad busted through the door.

"Elad!" Leia cried in relief. "Get me out of here! Before he comes back!"

X-7 took in the durasteel slab, the small table of torture devices, the injector sitting by her head. "What was he going to do to you?"

Leia shuddered in her restraints. "It's some kind of experimental brain agent," she said in disgust. "Designed to wring all the information out of my brain and then destroy it."

X-7 turned his back on the princess and scoured the floor. He seized a twisted piece of metal lying in the corner. He slammed the door shut, then wedged the metal underneath. He'd broken the lock, but this should hold, at least for a few minutes.

"What are you doing?" Leia asked.



## STAR WARS: Hostage

He approached the slab. "The building's filled with stormtroopers," he said, peering down at her. She was completely helpless. "Have to keep them out until we're done here."

"Done with what?"

"Getting you out of these restraints," X-7 said, pretending to look around for something to slice through the durasteel. He had to handle this carefully. She'd been tortured before, and resisted. There was a chance that even the mental agent would fail if she tried to fight it.

Which meant he needed to convince her not to fight.

X-7 palmed the injector, then bent over the cuff pinning her left arm to the table, as if examining the locking mechanism. He pulled out his blaster, switching it to the lowest setting, and pressed it to the cuff. "This could hurt, just a bit," he warned her.

She pressed her lips together, steeling herself.

With one hand, he shot the blaster, careful to miss the cuff and lightly singe her skin. With the other, he pressed the injector to her arm and injected the drug. The pain of the blaster bolt would disguise the lesser pain of the injection.

She grimaced. "That didn't feel like it worked."

"Sorry, Princess. The binders are stronger than I thought. There must be something in here that will cut them."

"Just hurry," she urged him. "We need to..."

"What?" he asked, pretending to search the lab, while keeping a close eye on her. She was breathing rapidly, and her skin had gone pale.

"Nothing, I just feel...strange," she said faintly. "Lightheaded."

"You've been through an ordeal," he told her. "It's only natural."

The drug was taking effect. He had to get his answers now, before the others showed up. Or before it killed her. "The Empire went to a lot of trouble to get its hands on you," he said casually.

## Alex Wheeler

"I'll never tell them anything," she said. Her eyes fluttered. "I'd die first."

"It must be a burden, keeping all those secrets."

"Is it very hot in here?" she asked, drawing in deep, ragged breaths. "We have to get out of here. Why don't you get me out of these binders?"

"I'm trying," he lied.

"Can't you shoot out the locking mechanism with your blaster?"

He looked at her curiously. "I just tried that," he reminded her. "You don't remember?"

"Of course I remember," she snapped. "I..." She shook her head as much as the neck restraint allowed, as if trying to clear the fog. "I'm just so tired."

It was now or never.

"Of course you're tired, Leia," he said kindly, switching on the miniature holorecorder hidden in his utility belt. The Commander would want proof. "You've done everything you could to protect the Rebel Alliance. Especially the pilot who destroyed the Death Star."

"The Empire can never find out who he is," she murmured, sweat beading along her forehead. Her pupils had narrowed to black pinpricks. "We have to protect him."

"I'd lay down my life for him," X-7 said. "But I can only protect him if I know his name."

Her eyes rolled back in her head.

"*Leia!*" he snapped.

A small sigh escaped from her lips.

"His *name*, Leia," X-7 urged her. "Who must we protect? Who destroyed the Death Star?"

"Luke." She smiled. "It was Luke."

Exactly as he had suspected. It would be so easy now to kill her—and then open the door and kill Luke, too. Mission accomplished.

## STAR WARS: Hostage

But the Commander had given him strict orders. Learn the name of the pilot and report back. He couldn't act until he got the kill order.

X-7 injected the remains of the serum into her arm. Given what he knew of brain agents, the odds were high that she wouldn't remember any of this when she recovered. If she recovered at all.

"If something happens...you have to take care of Luke," she whispered as her eyes slipped shut.

"Oh, don't worry, Your Highness. I will."

Ferus gathered his strength and pushed out with the Force. The door flew open.

Elad stood inside, staring down at a body.

The princess's body.

Elad met Ferus's eyes. "I was too late."

Han, Luke, and Chewbacca burst into the room, freezing alongside Ferus as they caught sight of Leia. Han's voice was ragged. "Is she—"

"No," Ferus and Luke spoke together. Ferus glanced at the boy. So he was connected enough to the Force—or at least to Leia—that he could sense her still pulsing with life.

However faintly.

"Whatever they did to her, she's still alive," Elad confirmed, "but we have to get her out of here." He had already broken through the restraints pinning her to the table.

Ferus scooped Leia off the table and cradled her gently against his chest. She stirred in his arms, her eyelids flickering. "Father?" she mumbled.

"No," he said softly, hurrying toward the exit. The others covered him. They'd taken out all the Imperials, but you never knew when reinforcements would arrive. "It's just—" He hesitated, not wanting to say: *It's Fess*. Not wanting to lie any more. "It's me. Don't worry, you're safe with me."

**Alex Wheeler**

She smiled, and her eyes drifted shut again. “I know.”

## Chapter Twenty

Leia hesitated just outside the door to the abandoned schoolhouse. Then she gave herself a little shake, and stepped inside. Luke and Kiro Chen sat side by side, their heads bent together in low conversation.

She cleared her throat.

Luke looked up. "I thought we still had time," he said.

While Fess and Elad had gotten Leia safely out of the medcenter, Han and Luke had ransacked the Imperials' com system. They'd confirmed that there had been no distress call—as far as the Empire was concerned, everything had proceeded as planned. But according to the transmission archives, those plans called for Darth Vader to arrive the next day.

It seemed prudent to blast off the planet before he showed up.

"We do," Leia said. "I just wanted to talk to Kiro before we left." *Wanted*, that was wrong. *Needed*.

Luke stood up. "I'll leave."

"No." She'd had enough of being left alone. "Stay. You're part of this now, too."

Leia sat down across from Kiro. He wouldn't look at her.

## Alex Wheeler

"I'm sorry about Halle Dray," she told him. "I know you two were close." Her memories of the kidnapping were strangely fuzzy, as if she'd taken a blow to the head. She remembered little of what had happened after the stormtroopers had taken her away. But she remembered seeing Halle and J'er Nahj hit the ground.

"*I'm* sorry," Kiro said, still keeping his eyes averted. "You should hate me."

"Whatever you did, you did it because you loved Alderaan. I could never hate you for that." Leia paused. "What will you do now?"

"Now?" he looked blank, like he couldn't imagine a future.

"Kiro knows he honors her memory by moving forward," Luke said, encouraging him. "By helping others, the way she wanted to."

Leia frowned. Halle Dray hadn't seemed the type to help anyone. But Kiro had obviously known a different side of her. Or maybe he'd just seen what he wanted to see. "The Rebel Alliance would welcome you," she said.

"My place is here," Kiro said, drawing himself upright. "With Nahj gone, and Halle...they need leaders." He lowered his eyes. "I know how you feel, Princess. You think it's cowardly not to fight."

"There's more than one way to fight the Empire," Luke assured him.

"Luke's right," Leia agreed. "You can do plenty of good here. And I'll do everything I can to help."

"I know." Kiro pressed his hands to his face. "I'd like to be alone now, please."

"We should go, anyway," Leia said. "It's time for us to leave this place."

Far past time. But a part of her wished she could stay.

Ferus waited for Leia at the spaceport, needing to say good-bye. As soon as she spotted him, she sent Luke off to help Han and Elad with some final repairs, then greeted him warmly. Ever

## STAR WARS: Hostage

since the rescue, it was as if she'd been trying to make up for the way she'd treated him in the past. Ferus wished that he could enjoy it, finally having her respect after all these years. But he knew it wouldn't last. Not when she heard what he had to say.

"I've been thinking about your offer," Fess said. After thanking him for his part in the rescue, Leia had urged him to throw in his lot with the Rebellion. "I'm afraid I can't join your fight."

"If it's because of the way I've treated you—" Leia smiled ruefully. "Seems like I'm doing a lot of apologizing today. One more can't hurt."

"You've treated me as I deserved," Ferus said.

"I'm beginning to suspect you're not the man I thought you were, Fess. The Rebellion needs all the help it can get—you should join us."

Ferus wanted to. And not just because he missed the days when he could protect her at every turn.

He had turned it over and over in his mind. Obi-Wan had been no help. *Search inside yourself*, he had said. *Know the answer, you do*.

Even in his frustration, Ferus had smiled, remembering better days when he and the other Padawans had made a game of imitating Jedi Master Yoda's odd speech patterns. And, frustrated or not, Ferus had followed the older man's advice.

For whatever reason, Vader had taken a special interest in Leia. If he learned about his connection to the princess, or to Luke, nothing would stop him until they were both destroyed.

*Or worse*, Ferus thought. *Until he reclaims his children*.

Luke wasn't ready to be trained as a Jedi yet. He needed to grow stronger on his own before he learned how to access such great power. And Leia...Ferus suspected Leia was strong enough. But training her in the Jedi ways would only make her more of a target. The stronger she grew, the greater the chance that Vader would sense the Force within her.

Just as he would sense Ferus, if Ferus stayed by her side.

## Alex Wheeler

Ferus had been watching and waiting for a long time. He had a new job now: Finding out what Darth Vader was up to.

And stopping him.

But how could he explain any of that to Leia?

"I don't put much faith in groups," he told her instead. "Eventually someone you trust will betray you."

She laughed bitterly. "You sound like Han. Afraid to believe in anything."

"I can't speak to whether Captain Solo is afraid, but I can assure you, *I'm* not."

*Is that true?* he wondered. *Or do I still fear repeating the mistakes of my past?* It felt like he was finally taking action, but was he just running away?

He missed the certainty of his youth with the Jedi, that rock solid knowledge that his choices were right. He saw it now in Luke.

Of course, he'd seen it in Anakin, too.

"I support the Rebellion, but I have other priorities right now," he said.

"What could be more important?" she asked angrily.

"You'd be surprised."

"Then go," she spit out. "Don't let me stop you."

"There are other ways to fight the Empire," Ferus pointed out. "I'm told that Kiro Chen—"

"Kiro's choice is not based on cowardice," she snapped. "Yours is."

Ferus told himself she was wrong. "I can't ask you not to be angry with me."

She crossed her arms. "I don't care enough to be angry."

"I can only ask that you trust me. This is the right thing." If it wasn't, if he left her alone and something happened...

He'd forgiven himself so much, but there would be no forgiveness for letting Leia die.



## STAR WARS: Hostage

"You should go," she said harshly. "Minister Manaa is meeting me here, and then I'm getting off this planet. The Alliance needs me."

"One more thing, Leia," he said. This was probably a mistake, he knew that. But he couldn't help himself. She was the closest thing he had to a daughter—and she didn't know him at all. "Ferus."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's my name," he said. "My real name. You know me as Fess Ilee, but that's a lie. I am Ferus Olin."

And for the first time in a long time, he was.

*Even with her eyes closed, she can tell her father is standing in her doorway.*

*"I'm sorry I ran away," she says, opening her eyes. There is no point in pretending to be asleep. "Am I punished?"*

*"We'll talk about that in the morning." He kisses her forehead. "I'm just glad Fess brought you home to me."*

*When she hears his name, she gets angry all over again. "He didn't have to," she complains. "I'm no baby. I didn't need his help."*

*"But someday you may," her father says. "And I want you to remember this night. Fess will always be there when you need him. If anything ever happens to me—"*

*She giggles. Not because it's funny, but because maybe if she laughs, she won't be afraid. "Nothing's going to happen to you. Don't be stupid."*

*"If it does, and you're in trouble, go to Fess. He'll know what to do. He'll always take care of you."*

Leia shook off the memory. She had believed almost everything her father had ever told her. But she'd never believed that. Fess, Ferus, whoever he was—obviously he wasn't the man Bail Organa had believed him to be. He wasn't anyone Leia could count on. It shouldn't have come as a surprise. It certainly shouldn't have mattered.

So why did she feel like she'd lost her father all over again?

## Chapter Twenty-One

*Everything always comes down to politics*, Han thought in disgust, drawing in a deep breath of the stale air. He knew Leia was in her element, convincing the prime minister to do exactly as she wanted. But Han couldn't stand to sit around and watch. Making nice with chuff-sucking leeches—especially ones who'd sold you out to the Empire—just wasn't his thing.

Han wandered slowly through the streets around the spaceport, enjoying the breeze while he could. The air back on Yavin 4 was almost always heavy and still. Sometimes days would go by without a single breath of wind.

*Then why am I going back?* Just to drop them off, he told himself. *Then I'll get on my way.*

Sometimes Han thought it would just be easier to give in. Join the Rebels. Throw on a uniform. Fight the good fight.

But something always stopped him. He could join the Alliance, sure. But he'd be pretending to be someone he wasn't. Wearing a mask.

And he didn't like masks any more than he liked uniforms.

"Captain Solo!" A scrawny arm popped up out of the crowd, waving furiously. A moment later, Mazi's pale face appeared. The

boy rushed toward him, his brothers close behind. “Didn’t think we’d see you before we left.”

“Going somewhere?” Han asked, surprised by how pleased he was to see the boys again. “And since when do you call me ‘captain?’”

The brothers struck a military pose, arching their backs and saluting. “We’re going to be respectful now,” Jez said proudly.

Lan elbowed him in the side. “It’s *respectable*,” he said, rolling his eyes.

“We’re got respect for him, that’s *respectful*,” Jez argued. “Full of respect. Get it?”

Lan smirked. “Full of respect—so that’s like, the opposite of what I got for you. *Respectless*.”

Mazi stepped in and caught Jez’s arm just as he threw the punch. “We’re going to be *respectful* to people like Captain Solo here—and that’ll make us respectable, so people give us all their respect,” he ordered them. He turned back to Han, his face flushed. “That’s what the guy said, anyway.”

“What guy?” Han asked.

“The guy who told us about the Rebellion,” Mazi said eagerly. “We’re going to be Rebels now. Fight back. We’re shipping out tonight.”

Han raised his eyebrows. Leia had designated several of the refugee leaders to act as recruiters in her stead. Apparently they were hard at work already. “Aren’t you a little young?”

Identical scowls drooped across the brothers’ faces. “No such thing as too young to stand up for what’s right,” Mazi said fiercely.

“The ‘guy’ tell you that, too?” Han asked.

Mazi shook his head. “That’s all me.”

“What gives, Captain Solo?” Lan asked. “Mazi said you’d be impressed.”

“Yeah. Sure. I just meant...” He stopped, unsure of exactly what it was he did mean.

## Alex Wheeler

Han liked his life. No ties, no obligations, that's what he always said. He and Chewie were totally free. It was the only option for a man like him.

But Mazi wasn't a man yet. He had a choice.

"I just meant I can't believe anyone's going to trust you with a blaster," Han said lightly. "Try not to shoot yourself in the foot."

"At least we'll be able to see our target without electrobinoculars, old man," Mazi teased. "I'm surprised a guy with your ancient eyes and creaky bones can even *find* your blaster. Much less remember how to use it."

Han narrowed his eyes. "You better hope I'm too old to catch up with you," he warned.

The boys looked at each other in confusion.

"That's your cue to run," Han teased, balling his hands into fists. "Unless you want to see what these creaky old bones can still do..."

The boys burst into laughter, and took off running down the street. "See you soon, Captain!" Mazi shouted, as he disappeared into the crowds. "Don't forget us!"

"I won't," Han said quietly.

But he was alone again.

"Minister Manaa," Leia said coolly, as the Delayan leader joined her at the *Millennium Falcon*. He had invited her to his office, but she felt safer on her own turf. There was always the chance he could turn on her like his deputy had—but if he did, he'd get an unpleasant surprise. Luke and Elad were carefully hidden, blasters at the ready, poised to fire at the first sign of trouble. The setup had been Luke's idea, but Elad had quickly agreed. It was sweet, Leia thought, the way Elad stayed so close by Luke's side, especially recently. It was as if he saw something of himself in Luke, and felt a special need to encourage and protect him.

No wonder: They weren't that different. Two fighters, willing to sacrifice themselves if need be.

Unlike Ferus.

She forced down her anger. This meeting mattered—Ferus didn't.

"Princess Leia," the prime minister said. "Always an honor."

She waited.

"So glad to see you've emerged safely from your ordeal," he said, giving her a goofy, hopeful grin. "The people of Delaya care deeply for your well-being."

"So I've seen," Leia said dryly.

"And, of course, I can only offer my deepest apologies for the behavior of Deputy Minister Lyonn."

Leia raised her eyebrows. "Perhaps I should offer you *my* deepest apologies. After all the trouble you went to, trading me to the Empire, it seems rather rude of me to have escaped."

Manaa twisted his face into an unconvincing mask of horror. "Surely you're not suggesting *I* had something to do with Lyonn's despicable plans? Delaya has always been a great friend to the Alderaan people!"

"So that's why you've shut them up in those filthy warehouses with barely enough food or water to last out the week?" Leia snapped.

The warmth drained out of Manaa's smile. "I've done everything I can for the refugees. But my first responsibility is to my own people."

"As my responsibility is to mine." Leia glared at him until he looked away. "Which is why you wanted me out of the way."

He met her gaze again, his eyes steely. The good-natured fool was gone. "You'll never prove it," he said coolly. "And even if you could, what good would it do? Imperial reinforcements are on the way. If I were you, I'd take my ship away—and never come back."

He was right. He'd broken no laws; she had no power here.

"Look around you, Your Highness," he added, gesturing to the smoggy air, the streets crowded with factories. The city was as ugly as Alderaan had been beautiful. "Delaya has long paid for

## Alex Wheeler

Alderaan's success. I see no reason why we should now pay for its failures."

"If I were you, Minister, I would give the Alderaan refugees the refuge they've been promised. Food, bacta, clothing." She ticked the items off on her fingers. "There are those who will help fund the effort—on my say-so. But that money is to go to the survivors. *Not* to the Delayan treasury."

"I don't see how you're in any position to give me orders," Manaa said, distaste in his voice.

"True," Leia admitted. "I'm an enemy of the Empire. As everyone who helps me is an enemy of the Empire."

"Exactly."

Leia felt like a krayt dragon toying with a woolamander. She hated this. But it was necessary.

"I can't imagine the Empire would take very kindly to your helping me," Leia said. "Much less collaborating with the Rebel Alliance."

"I haven't!" Manaa exclaimed. "I wouldn't!"

"And I'm sure Darth Vader will be very interested in your denials, especially once he receives anonymous reports of all your activities in support of the Rebels."

The blood had all drained from his face. "You wouldn't," he whispered.

"I'm sure Vader wouldn't blame innocent Delayans for the actions of its leader, but then..." Leia's chest tightened so much she could barely force the words out. *Saying it out loud doesn't make it true*, she promised herself. "The Empire didn't hesitate to fault the people of Alderaan for my actions, did they? I brought down their wrath on my planet...What makes you think I couldn't do the same to yours?"

Manaa's breath exploded from him in a miserable sigh. He sagged like a broken-down droid.

She was disgusted with herself. But she'd won.

"What do you want?" he asked, sounding defeated.

Leia told him.

"Well, it's done." Leia settled into the co-pilot's seat with a sigh. Chewbacca was down below, tinkering with the hyperdrive; Luke and Elad were doing calisthenics in the main hold. She and Han were alone in the cockpit.

"You made a *deal*?" Han asked incredulously.

"That was the idea," Leia said.

"I know, I just can't believe you're letting that dung grubber get away with it."

"Sometimes you have to make compromises," Leia told him.

"I don't have to do anything," Han pointed out. "Someone tries to get me, you better be sure I get *them*."

"*Some* of us try to take a longer view," Leia said. "We care about more than just the next payday."

"And some of us don't have a royal treasury to play with," Han retorted. "Or did you think I carted people like you across the galaxy for the fun of it?"

"I think you do it because you want to. Only reason you do anything," Leia said angrily. "Whatever you want, whenever you want. You're like a spoiled child."

"Hey, hold on there. If anyone here's spoiled, it's you."

"Me?"

"Yeah, you, sweetheart," he snarled. "You expect me to junk my whole life, just on your say-so? *Spoiled*."

"I don't expect anything from you but aggravation. You're just like *him*."

Han was lost. "Him who?"

"No one!"

Han never understood how they always ended up arguing—but usually he at least understood what they were arguing *about*. Not this time.

"How you live your life is your business," she said, ice cold. "You can't commit to anyone but yourself? *Fine*. But don't think you'll get my respect."

"Where's all this coming from, Highness?"

She exploded. "Stop calling me that!"

## Alex Wheeler

*Apologize*, he told himself. *It doesn't matter that you didn't do anything. Just apologize.*

"You want me to stop calling you that?" He smirked. "Then how 'bout you stop sitting up there on your throne and judging us peasants?"

"I don't have a throne anymore," she said in a rough voice. "The Empire *blew it up*."

That stopped him.

He'd always thought of their arguments as an exchange of friendly fire. They fought the way children fight, backing off before drawing blood. Most of the time, he only said the things he did to get a rise out of her. He'd always assumed she felt the same way.

But this was different. There was true anger in her eyes. Like she meant every word.

"I fight for something greater than myself," she said. "So does Luke. Elad. But you? Nothing's greater than the great Han Solo, right? You don't care what the Empire does, if it doesn't directly affect you. Who knows if you care about anything."

"Don't tell me how I feel," he growled.

"Do you feel?" She laughed harshly. "In that case, I guess I'm wrong, you're not heartless. There's only one other reason for you to behave like you do. You're a coward."

Han slammed his fist down. "That's what you think, Princess?"

"That's what I think, *Captain*."

He stood up, fearing that if he stayed any longer, whatever was between them could break beyond repair. "I don't know who you're really mad at, Princess, but it's not me. Deal with it, don't deal with it, I don't care. But leave me out of it."

He stormed out.

It made a good exit line, there was just one problem: He wasn't sure he believed it. Sure, maybe she was picking a fight to make herself feel better. Or maybe she was just telling him what she really thought of him.



## **STAR WARS: Hostage**

Maybe she was right.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

**X**-7 was a patient man. Impatience was for those who had an ever-growing collection of needs. They rushed from one thing to another, always in motion, never satisfied. But X-7 had only one need: pleasing the Commander. He found it easy to remain still. To wait.

It was a useful skill for a hunter to possess.

But by the time the *Millennium Falcon* took off, X-7 was as close to impatient as he ever got. His prey was in sight, and he was like a coiled sand snake, ready to strike.

The Delayan communication system couldn't be trusted, especially with Vader's forces approaching the sector. X-7 forced himself to wait until he had returned to the ship. Then he forced himself to wait until he could slip away without anyone noticing. He sat patiently as Luke and Han bickered, as the protocol droid chattered and the Wookiee roared, as Han and Leia maneuvered around each other with icy politeness that barely masked their anger.

He waited until he got the privacy he required, and then he opened a secure channel to the Imperial Center and delivered news of his success.

## STAR WARS: Hostage

"There is no doubt?" the Commander asked, barely disguising his eagerness.

"No doubt. The boy flies like no human I've ever seen," X-7 said, transferring his recording as they said. "He was up to the task, I'm sure of it. And it's the only explanation for why the princess allowed a young, untrained recruit from the edge of the galaxy into her inner circle. Nor could she have lied under the influence of the serum. *Luke Skywalker* destroyed the Death Star."

"Then he must die," the Commander said. "And soon, especially if the Dark One is on the hunt."

"As you wish."

"Do it however you'd like," the Commander said. "But make sure you shift the blame to someone else. After the kill, you'll stay with the Rebels and continue reporting on their activities."

"Consider it done."

The day, like most days on Yavin 4, had been unbearably hot. But as the sun set, a cool breeze cut through the humid air. Chucklucks buzzed and twittered from the Massassi trees, and bellybirds swooped overhead, slicing through the golden sunset. On nights like this, it wasn't uncommon for some of the younger recruits to strike up a game of smashball in one of the clearings.

It also wasn't uncommon for Luke to take a swoop bike ride through the jungle, glorying in the wind on his face and the world rushing by. It reminded him of his days racing across the dunes on Tatooine—the only moments in his childhood when he'd truly been happy. As if, pushing the swoop fast enough, he could outrun his life.

X-7 knew this, because Luke had confided in him. They were, after all, friends.

X-7 knew many things.

He knew which swoop Luke preferred to use.

He knew where on Yavin 4 a person could find ample quantities of explosive detonite charges.

## Alex Wheeler

He knew how to access Han Solo's bunk, and where its hiding places were. He knew where, for example, a person could hide ample quantities of detonite. Hide them precisely enough that Han would never suspect they were there—but that a cursory search of the bunk would quickly reveal them.

X-7 also knew how to rewire the ignition on a swoop bike, connecting it to the small packets of detonite tucked safely into the repulsorlift engines and the engine intake valve.

"Going out for a ride?" he asked, as Luke passed by. X-7 had positioned himself far enough from the swoop to avoid any shrapnel; close enough that he would be able to watch.

Luke grinned sheepishly. "You know I can't resist weather like this."

"I know," X-7 said. "It should be a memorable ride."

"Let's hope so," Luke said, hopping onto the swoop and waving goodbye.

*Consider it done*, X-7 had told the Commander, and he meant this literally. He had served the Commander for more than ten years, and never once had he failed to accomplish his mission. Once the order was given, its result was inevitable.

Luke Skywalker didn't know it yet, but he was already dead.







# ***RENEGADE***

BY ALEX WHEELER







## Chapter One

The blue beam lit up the night, slashing through the darkness with an eerie glow. It painted swooping circles of light through the still air, the brilliant blue dancing to the music of chittering chucklucks and warbling bellybirds. Then, suddenly, the beam went out.

The darkness was complete.

Luke Skywalker stood motionless in the shadows of the towering Massassi trees, his hand gripped tightly around the lightsaber's hilt, waiting.

For what, he didn't know.

There were times when the lightsaber seemed to illuminate the world. Wielding the Jedi weapon made him feel safe and in control, as if the warm, blue glow kindled something inside of him. The lightsaber had been his father's, and it was his only true connection to the man who had been dead for as long as Luke could remember.

Times like these, he felt like a true Jedi. Like he was joined with the Force that Obi-Wan had told him about, surrounding him, penetrating him. He was filled with a cool certainty that the Force would guide his way. That the lightsaber was more than a connection to his father. It was a connection to his destiny.

## Alex Wheeler

Then there were the other times. Times when the darkness overpowered the light.

Luke had spent the last several hours in the heart of the jungle, training with his lightsaber and trying to ignore his growing sense of dread. There could be nothing to fear on a night like this. The tropical humidity of Yavin 4 had given way to an unusually balmy evening. Massassi leaves rustled in the cool breeze, and in the distance, Luke could hear the muffled shouts of a casual game of zoneball. Inspired by the weather, the Rebels had come alive, engaging in landspeeder races, pick-up Grav-ball games, and parties. As if no one sensed the dark clouds on the horizon, the air heavy with doom.

Clearly none of them did, except for Luke, who suspected he was imagining things. Searching for problems where none existed. And so, unable to sweat out his tension in lightsaber training, he abandoned the calisthenics. On a night like this, there was only one sure way to cast off the unwanted tension—to escape all his problems, real and imaginary, giving in to the sheer joy of speed.

The speeder bikes were parked near the living quarters. Princess Leia Organa waved at him through the window as he passed, then turned back to her conversation with Han Solo. Although Luke couldn't hear them through the transparisteel, he could easily guess what they were doing: arguing.

It was pretty much all they ever did.

For a moment, he thought about going inside to break up the fight. But instead, he continued toward his bike. It was too nice a night to spend cooped up inside. He knew that trapped between four walls, his anxiety would likely boil over. He needed to be out in the wild, riding fast and free.

Tobin Elad, one of the newest recruits to the Rebel cause, was leaning against the crusty, purple bark of a crooked Massassi tree, watching the planet Yavin dip beneath the horizon. The night blazed orange as the massive gas giant plunged through the

clouds. “Nice weather for a ride,” Elad said, nodding as Luke passed.

The darkness was back. Stronger than ever. Luke forced a weak smile, fighting off the nausea. “Want to join me?”

Elad shook his head. “Another time,” he said. “But have a good one.”

Luke climbed aboard the bike, eager to get started. The speeders could go more than 500 kilometers an hour—surely fast enough to outrun the darkness.

He turned the ignition. The engine roared to life.

And everything froze.

For Luke, time slowed nearly to a stop, and everything became frighteningly clear. The burnt umber of the sky, the humid kiss of the wind. The vibrations of the speeder bike beneath him. The certainty that something was terribly, terribly wrong. This wasn’t darkness he could outrun or ignore. This wasn’t his imagination.

This was a warning.

As time sped into motion again, Luke flung himself from the speeder. He didn’t think, he just acted, launching himself into the air—as the bike exploded in a ball of blue-gold fire.

X-7 didn’t feel, not in the normal human sense.

But as Luke’s body slammed into the ground, limbs bent at odd, awkward angles, as the raging fire crept toward his still, broken form, X-7 allowed himself a small smile. There was nothing like the satisfaction of a job well done.

Then he saw Luke’s chest rise and fall.

His smile disappeared.

X-7, the man Luke knew as Tobin Elad, rushed to kneel beside the body. If anyone was watching, it would look like the loyal Elad was desperate to save his fallen friend. No one would see the assassin’s hand covering Luke’s mouth, his fingers pinching Luke’s nose shut, the feeble flailing of a wounded body struggling to breathe. Just a few more seconds, and his mission

## Alex Wheeler

would be complete. Luke Skywalker, destroyer of the Death Star, hope of the Rebellion, target of the Empire's most ruthless assassin, would finally be—

*"Luuuuuuuke!"*

X-7 winced as Leia's screech pierced the night. He had only a split second to decide—kill Luke now, once and for all, and risk discovery? Or let the situation play itself out.

He let his hand drop away from Luke's nose and mouth. Within moments, a panicked crowd had formed around the fallen Rebel. "The bike just exploded," X-7 said, as Leia cradled Luke's head in her lap, urging him to hold on until the medical droids arrived. Han Solo appeared just behind her, hands clenched in frustration at not being able to act. "It's lucky he wasn't killed instantly."

Lucky indeed. The speeder had been wired with enough explosives to blow Luke's body to bits—but that was assuming Luke had stayed on the bike. Instead, he'd thrown himself out of the way, just in time.

*How did he know?* X-7 thought, frustrated.

Not that it mattered. The shock wave had caught him, flung him like a rag doll. And if Luke's current injuries didn't kill him, X-7 would help them along. Nothing was easier than taking down weakened prey.

Three 2-1B medical droids loaded Luke onto a stretcher and carried him away, their prongs and manipulator arms already at work assessing the damage. As the fire burned itself out, the crowd lingered, reluctant to leave the scene.

"Could it have been an accident?" Leia asked, looking anxiously in the direction the droids had taken Luke.

Han and X-7 shook their heads at the same time. "Someone sabotaged that bike," X-7 said grimly. "No doubt."

"But who'd want to hurt the kid?" Han said.

X-7 held in another small smile. Han was about to get his answer.

They all were.

## Chapter Two

*This is wrong*, Leia thought, waiting impatiently for the Rebel security patrol to bring her some kind of answers. Yavin 4 was supposed to be a stronghold, a safe base for the Rebel Alliance. *Alliance* was the key word. They were supposed to all be on the same side. Fighting the Empire, not each other.

But somehow, an enemy had found his or her way into the heart of the Rebellion. And now Luke was immersed in a bath of healing bacta, fighting for his life; the enemy was still out there somewhere. And Leia was just waiting. Helpless.

Useless.

General Dodonna and Commander Willard had convened a hasty tribunal to investigate the crime and prosecute the would-be assassin—if he or she could be found. Leia would have chosen General Airen Cracken to head the investigation, but she had to admit, the leader of Alliance Intelligence had bigger things to worry about. Which meant Leia would have to do the job herself.

“Report,” she ordered Lieutenant Fraj T’lin, whom she’d tasked with beginning the field work while she hovered anxiously by Luke’s bacta tank. T’lin flinched, like he was afraid she would lash out. Leia sighed, forcing herself to be patient. She was

## Alex Wheeler

exhausted and frustrated, not a good combination. After the explosion, the medical droids had struggled to keep Luke alive through the night. He made it through to sunrise, but it had taken nearly another full day and night to stabilize him. A full day and night that Leia had sat beside his unconscious, broken body, silently begging him to live. And wondering what she would do if he died.

She hadn't slept. How could she, when Luke was fighting to survive?

How could she sleep now, when the assassin was still out there?

"Well?" she snapped, when T'lin seemed reluctant to speak. "Have you uncovered anything?"

The lieutenant, an Arpor-Lan, tugged nervously at the stubby horns sprouting from his chin. "We released our modified patrol droids throughout the compound. Each is capable of detecting traces of detonite through more than two meters of durasteel or any other protective casing."

Leia forced herself to be patient. T'lin was babbling, and she wanted to shake him, force him to get to the point. But she had to remind herself that the explosion had come as a nasty surprise to everyone. They were all rattled. They were all doing their best.

*Including the enemy, Leia thought. He's doing his best, too. To kill Luke. And he almost succeeded.*

"And your droids found something...?" she prompted T'lin.

He cleared his throat. "Maybe it's better you see for yourself."

Leia rolled her eyes, but she agreed to follow him. The lieutenant brought her down the path toward the living quarters, then wove through the buildings to a familiar door.

"What are we doing here?" Leia asked, beginning to understand why Lieutenant T'lin was refusing to meet her gaze.

"Through here, Your Highness," he said in response, ushering her into the room.

While on Yavin 4, Han Solo spent most of his time on the *Millennium Falcon*. No reason to put down roots, he always said. After all, it's not like he was joining the Rebellion.

He'd always refused to do that.

Still, the ship was cramped, rusted, and falling apart. And when he tired of tinkering with cracked transducer panels or leaky fuel conduits, the sparsely furnished room offered Han a place to stretch out and relax with a good game of dejarik.

The room was empty now, except for a rusted patrol droid. Like most of the Rebellion's equipment, the droids had been scavenged from abandoned Imperial outposts and retrofitted for service to the Alliance. This one, equipped with a highly sensitive modified sensor array, hovered next to a low cabinet, whirring urgently.

The door was half-open, offering a glimpse inside. Leia caught her breath.

"Is that...?" she said when she was able to speak.

Lieutenant T'lin nodded, looking surer of himself, now that she could see the evidence for herself. "Two kilos of detonite. Enough to blow half this base sky-high. Who knows what he was planning to do with the rest of it."

"He wouldn't have," Leia said. "He couldn't have."

"I know he's a friend, Your Highness—"

"Where is he?" she snapped, remembering herself. She forced the emotion out of her voice and off her face. "Have you confronted him with this?"

"Denied it was his," T'lin said flatly. "Claims he was framed. Got no proof, though."

*Of course he was framed, she reassured herself. Han would never betray us. He would never hurt Luke.*

"How well do you really know him?" the lieutenant asked.

"Well enough," she said tersely. "I presume you've taken him into custody?"

"He's waiting to be interrogated," T'lin said. "We assumed you'd want to select someone for the job."

Alex Wheeler

"You assumed right," she said. "I'll do it myself."

"You don't think he could have done it?" Tobin Elad half-said, half-asked, as they stood outside the room where Han was being held. Though she'd only known him a short time, he'd become a good friend.

Of course, that's what she would have said about Han, too.

*Nothing's changed*, she told herself. *Han didn't do this.*

Leia shook her head. "I know Han. Someone must have set him up."

Elad nodded. "It could have been anyone." He gave her a wry smile. "Maybe you should be interrogating me," he suggested. "After all, I just showed up out of nowhere, right? You barely know me."

"You showed up out of nowhere and saved all our lives," she reminded him. "And you joined the Rebellion as soon as you had the chance. You've been with us every step of the way."

"Just like Han," Elad pointed out.

"Han refuses to join us," Leia pointed out. "He claims the only cause he believes in is the cause of himself."

"He's a good liar."

"Yes...." Leia said thoughtfully. "He is."

"I know Han brags about being willing to do anything for money," Elad said, "and that he's always reminding us that the Rebellion isn't his fight, but *you* know him, Leia. You know who he really is."

Leia knew Elad had been trying to comfort her. To assure her that Han was innocent. And she *knew* that to be the case. Deep down, she felt it. Han was a good man, a loyal man.

But with every word out of Elad's mouth, she found herself more and more uncertain. How well *did* she know Han? How much of what came out of his mouth was bluster—and how much was true? He boasted about being a mercenary, loyal to no one but himself.

*Empty boasts*, she reminded herself.



Maybe.

“You want me to go in there with you?” Elad asked.

She didn’t want to face Han alone. She didn’t want to face him at all, not with these accusations hanging over him. But Luke’s life was at stake—perhaps all their lives. “I need to do this myself,” she said.

She had to find out what was really going on, and right now, Han was her only lead. This wasn’t about what she wanted. It was about being objective. Yes, she would give Han every chance in the world to establish his innocence. But in the end, she wasn’t here as his friend. She was here as a representative of the Rebel Alliance Tribunal, and that meant she needed more than just her gut instinct that Han was innocent.

She needed proof.

Han didn’t know how the explosives had ended up in his quarters. He didn’t know who would want to frame him. He didn’t know what the Rebels would do if they didn’t believe his story, and he didn’t know how long they thought they could hold him in this dank cell, asking him question after question.

But he did know who they’d send in to get their answers.

He knew she wouldn’t be able to resist.

“Greetings, Your Worshipfulness,” he said wryly, as she stepped into the room. “Fancy meeting a princess like you in a place like this.”

She scowled. “Luke is doing better, if you care,” she said.

As if there was any doubt that he cared.

“You seen him yet?” Han asked, careful to keep his voice neutral. He wasn’t about to go all weepy over the kid, especially now that he knew Luke would be all right. Sure, he’d been worried, but Luke was tough. Certainly tougher than Han had expected, the first time they’d met. Just like that old hermit of his—both of them proving more than met the eye.

Of course, tough hadn’t been enough to keep the old man alive.

## Alex Wheeler

*Luke's fine, he reminded himself. Worry about yourself. And Chewie.*

The room, really a large closet in the rear corridor of a storage facility, was completely bare, except for two chairs. Han was sprawled in a corner, doing his best to look comfortable and unconcerned. But when Leia sat down in one of the chairs and pointed to the other one, he gave in and took a seat.

"I don't know anything about those explosives," he said, getting down to business. "Someone's setting me up."

"You have proof?" Leia asked. She sounded almost skeptical.

Which was impossible, because of all people, Leia had to know he'd never hurt Luke....right?

"You want me to *prove* someone's setting me up?" Han asked. "How am I supposed to prove anything, locked in here?"

She didn't answer. "Who do you think it might be?" she asked.

"I don't *know*," he said, frustrated. "But it's obviously got to be someone."

"Because?"

"Because it wasn't *me*," he snapped. "Why would I try to kill the kid?"

Leia raised her eyebrows. "Why do you do anything?"

"I don't believe this!" Han exclaimed. "What kind of laserbrain does it take to think that *I* would go after Luke?"

He expected her temper to flare, as it always did. They would argue, as they always did, and in the end, she wouldn't be able to stop herself from laughing, as she always did. Then they would agree that this was insane and get to work on finding the real culprit.

Except she didn't take the bait. And when she spoke, her voice was level and perfectly calm. Only then did he start to worry. "I don't know why anyone would go after Luke," she said. "But someone did."

"You really believe I could do this?" It looked bad—he knew that. Explosives in Han's quarters, explosives on Luke's bike.

Even a nerf-brain could draw the connection. But Leia was no nerf-brain, which meant she should have been able to see that the connection was *too* obvious. This wasn't just a frame-up job, it was a *bad* frame-up job.

It was almost like she didn't want to see it—like she *wanted* him to be guilty.

"I'm just trying to be objective," Leia said. "Evaluate the evidence, find the truth. My personal beliefs don't enter into it."

"Okay, let's say I did it," he said, trying a different tack. "Why would I be stupid enough to hide the explosives in my quarters? Why not on my ship? Or in someone else's?"

"Why would someone set you up?" Leia countered. "You barely know anyone here."

"Because I'm not a part of the Rebellion, you mean?" Han said. "That's what this is about, isn't it?"

"That's not—"

"After all the times I've saved your skin, you still don't trust me, because I won't put on a uniform and sign on the dotted line."

"I'm just asking questions, Han."

"And I'm done answering them." Han folded his arms. "After everything I've done for you and your Rebellion, you suspect me of —" He shook his head. "No."

Leia leaned forward. "If you're innocent, Han, help me prove it. Help me help you."

But there it was: *if*.

She didn't trust him. After all they'd been through. "You know, I'd never accuse *you* of something like this," he pointed out.

"That's different," she said.

"Yeah. I guess it is." Han stood up and returned to the dark corner he'd been lounging in when she arrived. "I guess we're done here."

"This isn't over," Leia warned him. "It's my job to get to the bottom of this."

**Alex Wheeler**

“Fine.” Han couldn’t look at her. “But it’s not my job to help you.”

She still didn’t betray a hint of emotion, nothing to indicate there was anything between them but unanswered questions. She didn’t even slam the door on her way out.

But she still locked it.

## Chapter Three

**H**ey, you can't go in there!" The guard backed up against the wall of the makeshift brig, blaster in one hand, comlink in the other. He was clearly undecided about what he should do first: call for reinforcements or shoot. "This is your last warning, you hairy—*oof*."

With a single, furry blow to the head, Chewbacca saved him the trouble of deciding. The Wookiee slammed the blaster into the wall, then crushed the comlink under his massive foot. The guard would be fine when he woke up. He just wouldn't wake up any time soon.

These humans were so fragile. Sometimes it seemed even a sneeze would knock them over.

A Wookiee sneeze, at least.

Chewbacca was a Wookiee of many loyalties. But none was greater than the loyalty he owed to the human who'd saved his life back on Kashyyyk. Ever since, when Han Solo called, Chewbacca delivered.

And that night, as Yavin's many moons crawled across the sky, the call had come: "Get me out of here, Chewie!"

Chewbacca planned to deliver.

## Alex Wheeler

Han was being kept in the back room of a supply warehouse. Once past the Rebel guarding the door, Chewbacca thudded down the hallway. His bulk made stealth impossible; his strength made it unnecessary.

“Stop the Wookiee!” someone shouted from behind him.

“Don’t kill him!” came another voice. “Just stun him!”

The blaster fire came fast and heavy. Though he knew it wouldn’t be lethal, Chewbacca dodged and weaved, ducking the explosions. A few glanced off his thick hide, but it took more than a single stun blast to put down a Wookiee. Still, he had to find some cover. The guards were calling for reinforcements—soon he’d be even more outnumbered and the rescue mission would be ruined.

He couldn’t let Han down.

Chewbacca ducked behind the nearest obstacle he could find, a giant durasteel cart brimming with the disgusting protein supplements the humans ate for many of their meals. Laserfire raked the side of the cart, scorching the durasteel and sending sparks flying into the smoky air, but Chewbacca was safe for the moment. He peeked over the top of the cart. There were only four humans, now standing abreast in the hallway, blocking his path to Han.

The cart was on wheels.

Chewbacca had seen the facilities workers wheeling these carts to the kitchen—it took three humans to inch them slowly to the repulsorlift conveyor belts that would distribute the food. The Wookiee pressed one hairy shoulder against the cart and pushed it forward with ease. He heaved it down the hallway. The guards scattered, but not quickly enough. Humans and blasters went flying, as the metal beast mowed them down in their path. In the confusion, Chewbacca snatched their blasters out of the air, tucking two into his bandolier and shattering the other two with a single sharp crack against the wall.

Even the most foolish human wouldn’t face down a Wookiee without weapons. The four men cowered against the wall, hands

in the air. Chewbacca pointed at one of their comlinks and growled.

No one moved.

Humans could be so dense sometimes. Chewbacca pulled out his own comlink, miming talking into it, then pointed at the door on the far side of the hall.

One of the guards nodded quickly. "I think he wants us to call off the reinforcements," he told the others in a squeaky voice. "Done." He raised his comlink. "Uh, false alarm over here at the brig," he said, shakily. "All's well with the prisoner. Facility is secure." Then he gave Chewbacca a hopeful grin. "That okay, boy?" he asked, speaking slowly and enunciating clearly, as if Chewbacca was a rather large and rather stupid pet.

*Don't hurt anyone you don't have to*, Han had said.

Chewbacca sighed. And instead of whacking the human over the head, he knotted the four guards together with their own binders. Then he hurried to the end of the hall to retrieve his best friend.

The door was locked. But when Chewbacca pounded a massive fist against it, the thin plastoid crumbled like flimsiplast. Han was already on his feet. Chewbacca tossed his friend a blaster. "Took you long enough!" Han complained, heading for the open door.

Chewbacca growled.

"Yeah, yeah, you did fine, Chewie," Han admitted. "Now—you want a medal, or you want to get out of here?"

Apparently, the Alliance had kept its suspicions of Han under wraps. Because when he and Chewie swept into the main hangar deck, the deck officers on duty just waved him a sleepy hello. They were used to seeing Han and Chewbacca tinkering with the *Falcon* at all hours of the night, and blasting into orbit for the occasional emergency mission. The Alliance had instituted a strict departure protocol, but Han wasn't much for protocols, and everyone knew it.

## Alex Wheeler

“Requesting permission for departure!” he shouted, winking as he ran past the senior deck officer. The officer, barely more than a kid, flushed with pleasure at the friendly gesture. No one but the newest, greenest recruits got stuck with the overnight shift. And all of the newest, greenest recruits craved attention from Han Solo.

“Permission granted,” the kid shouted back, grinning. Han and Chewbacca hurtled toward the ship, strapped themselves in, and threw themselves into the takeoff protocol. With a thunder of engines and a cloud of black steam from a broken exhaust port, the *Millennium Falcon* was in the air.

The Corellian freighter might not have looked too pretty, but she could take off in a hurry when she had to.

As she often did.

“*Millennium Falcon*, this is base. Return to surface immediately.”

Han ignored the request.

“Repeat, *Millennium Falcon*, return to base. You are *not* cleared to leave the system.”

“Ready to fire up the hyperdrive, Chewie?” Han asked, as the comlink blared with increasingly hysterical commands. He just needed to get a little farther from the moon, and then he could engage the hyperdrive and never look back.

“Captain Solo, this is General Leia Organa. Return to base immediately. This is an order.”

“You didn’t say pretty please, *General*,” Han growled at the console.

“Land the ship immediately, Han, or we’ll be forced to take extreme measures—”

Han flicked off the comlink. “How many times do I have to tell you, lady? *No one* tells me where to fly my ship.”

Chewbacca let out an alarmed bark.

“They’re bluffing!” Han exclaimed. “They would never—” The ship shuddered beneath them as an alarm began to blare.



Han peered incredulously at a squadron of X-wing fighters that had just become visible in the cockpit window.

Chewbacca yelped.

"I *know* they're firing at us!" Han snapped. "Well, what are you waiting for? Evasive maneuvers!" Han didn't want to fire back at the Rebel ships. He probably knew some of the guys flying those X-wings, and he didn't want to hurt them.

*Not unless I have to*, he promised himself.

*Not unless they make me.*

Two of the X-wings peeled off from their formation and angled toward the *Falcon*. Laserfire streaked through space, peppering the hull. The shields held—but they wouldn't for long. Han took the ship into a steep dive, then veered to port full throttle, hoping to get below the X-wings. But the small ships were too maneuverable, and they shadowed him every step of the way.

"Engage hyperdrive!" Han shouted, as a blast slammed into the primary sensor array. "Let's get out of here." They weren't shooting to kill, but they were still shooting, and sooner or later, he was going to have to shoot back. And if it came to that...well, there was no way he could ever return to Yavin 4.

*Not that I'm ever going back*, Han reminded himself, as the ship bucked and shuddered beneath him. *Not ever*. Another volley of laserfire streaked toward them, and Han steered the ship into a 360° loop, aiming straight for the X-wings. They scattered at the last minute, darting out of his way, but quickly swiveling around to take aim at the starboard shield projector.

"Why aren't we in hyperspace yet?" Han growled.

Chewbacca yelped in alarm.

"Whaddaya *mean* it's not working?" Han asked, glaring at the temperamental hyperdrive controls. "Weren't you supposed to fix that?"

Chewbacca barked angrily.

"I *know* you had to come rescue me," Han admitted. "It's called multitasking."

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The Wookiee snorted, then turned back to the tangled nest of frayed wiring that controlled their ship's hyperdrive. He warned Han that getting it up and running could take several minutes. "We don't *have* several minutes," Han snarled. A barrage of laserfire raked across the ship. There was a spurt of fire from the port dorsal engine. A couple more hits like that and the engines would cut out all together, leaving them dead in space like a sitting kaadu. "We may not even have several *seconds*!" Han whacked the hyperdrive controls in frustration.

There was a soft whirring noise, and then the darkness of space flashed blinding white. Stars streamed past the window, twinkling points stretching to long, glowing strands that turned the galaxy into a tunnel of light. "Huh," Han said, staring in surprise at the palm of his hand. "Guess I should have tried that sooner."

They had entered hyperspace; they were safe.

*Safe from the Rebel Alliance*, Han thought sourly. *Never thought I'd be on the run from them.*

They flew for several long moments in silence. Then, finally, Han couldn't stand it anymore. "Go ahead," he ordered Chewbacca. "Say it."

The Wookiee barked innocently.

"You know what," Han said, leaning back in his seat. A drop of grease from the leaking cooling tubes splattered onto his head. He'd been planning to repair the thing later that week.

Maybe this was all for the best, he told himself. He'd gotten too comfortable, hanging around with Luke and Leia, pretending he was one of them. He'd gone soft.

Chewbacca was still playing dumb.

"C'mon, say what you've been thinking ever since we left the moon," Han urged him, irritably. He could tell when the Wookiee was holding out on him. "Go on; get it off your big, hairy chest."

Chewbacca sighed, then growled.

“Well, I couldn’t very well protect Luke from the inside of a jail cell, could I?” Han retorted.

Chewbacca growled again.

“No, I don’t know how I can help him from up here, either, fuzzbrain. I do know that if I don’t pay back Jabba, I’m not going to be helping anyone any time soon. Hard to help when you’re dead,” Han said, groaning at the thought of how angry the Hutt crime lord must be by now. “We’ve wasted too much time playing war games. We need to rack up some credits. And in the meantime, if we happen to dig up something that’ll help Luke—”

Chewbacca cut in with an insistent yowl.

“Why should I care about clearing my name?” Han scoffed. “They want to think I’m a traitor, after all I’ve done for them? Let ’em.”

The Wookiee hooted.

“Leia?” Han forced a laugh. “Why would I care what Her Royal Worshipfulness thinks of me?”

Chewbacca opened his mouth as if to disagree, but Han had had enough. “Just fly the ship, will ya?”

*I didn’t turn my back on Leia or the Rebellion*, he reminded himself, taking an inventory of all the instruments that had been damaged by the Rebel attack. *They turned their backs on me.*

Light.

Noise.

Pain.

Dark.

This was Luke’s reality. He opened his eyes, grasped at a familiar voice, a face, *something* to hold onto, that would keep him from drifting away. But he could never hold tight enough; life was a jumble of sound and color that made no sense. He didn’t know where he was; he barely knew *who* he was. He was a body that breathed, a body that hurt. And then his eyes would shut and the darkness would claim him again. A body that slept.

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Time had no meaning in the world of pain. It could have been hours, it could have been years.

And then it was over. He opened his eyes, and he was returned to himself. And she was waiting for him.

“Easy,” Leia said quietly, as Luke struggled to sit up. “You need to rest.”

“What happened?” Luke croaked, his throat dry and cracked. But even as he spoke, he was remembering: the speeder. The explosion.

The dark warning from somewhere inside of him—or from outside? From the *Force*? The warning that had saved his life.

“Someone tried to kill you, Luke,” Leia said. “If you hadn’t jumped off that speeder when you did...”

“Old Ben was right,” Luke murmured, amazed. “*Let go of your conscious self and act on instinct.*”

“What?”

“Nothing. Just something an old friend once told me.” Gingerly, Luke tested out his arms, his legs. All seemed to be in working order.

“You were injured in the blast,” Leia explained, “but you’ve been immersed in bacta for the last few days, and you’re making a full recovery. Everything should be back to normal soon.”

There was a strange look in her eyes. Luke didn’t understand it, but he knew that nothing was back to normal. “What aren’t you telling me?”

She rested her hand on his. “Later,” she said. “When you’re stronger.”

She was always trying to protect him. But he was stronger than she thought.

To prove it, Luke pushed himself into a sitting position. He swallowed hard, and when he spoke, his voice was clear. “Who set the explosives?” he asked. “Has the Empire attacked?” But as soon as he said it, he knew that made no sense. Nobody understood why Imperial forces hadn’t yet attacked Yavin 4. But if the Empire had decided it was time to act, surely they wouldn’t

mess around with the death of a single pilot. They would destroy the base, and every living being on it.

But if not Imperial agents, then who?

"We're still investigating," Leia said.

"But you know something," Luke pushed, unsure why he was so certain. Was it because he just knew Leia well enough to see behind her mask? Or was it the Force again, guiding him toward the truth?

She held his gaze for a long moment, then nodded. "A cache of explosives was located...in Han's quarters."

"Then he was framed!" Luke exclaimed. "Han would never try to hurt me."

"That's what I thought, too," Leia said.

*Thought.* Past tense.

Luke shook his head. "You *can't* think—"

"I wanted to clear his name," Leia said. "I was just trying to get some information, so we'd have a place to start, but he's such a worrt-headed, hot-tempered—" She pressed her lips together, then lowered her gaze. "He broke out of custody," she said. "The *Falcon* lifted off without clearance and entered hyperspace. He's gone."

"But..." Luke trailed off, speechless.

"...why would an innocent man run? That's what General Dodonna said when I informed him. Maybe it's my fault." Leia gave herself a little shake, as if she was trying to slough off her doubts about Han—or maybe her loyalty to him. "Either way, he won't be back anytime soon, not after the sendoff he got." She scowled in frustration. "I told those pilots just to *warn* him, not to *fire*."

"Rebel pilots attacked *Han*?" Luke yelped, lurching upright so quickly that a wave of dizziness swept over him. Leia put out a hand to steady him, but he shook her off. "Is he...?"

"He's fine," Leia assured him. "That ship may be a bucket of bolts, but he can still outfly anyone he—" She stopped abruptly,

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looking angry at herself. “Han’s fine,” she said brusquely. “*You’re* the one in danger. And if Han didn’t set those explosives—”

“He didn’t,” Luke cut in.

“Then whoever did is still out there,” she said. “Someone’s after you, Luke, and for all we know, they’re going to keep coming after you until you’re dead. We have to get you out of here.”

“You want me to run away?” Luke asked incredulously.

“Just until we get to the bottom of this,” Leia said. “Think about it—we can’t trust *anyone*.”

“But—”

“The Rebel Alliance *needs* you, Luke.” Leia held herself very still and upright, as she often did when she was trying to cover up some personal weakness. “You’re too valuable to lose. Luke—please.”

That was as close as she would ever come to begging him, Luke knew, and he couldn’t stand to see it. “Okay,” he agreed. “Under two conditions.”

“What?”

“First, you come with me.”

“I’m needed here!” Leia protested.

“If I’m in danger, you could be, too,” Luke reasoned. “And I’m not leaving you here to face that alone.”

“What’s the second condition?” Leia asked, in a weary tone that made it clear she would give in.

For the first time since waking up, Luke smiled. “I get to pick where we go.”

*Pathetic*, X-7 thought, approaching the room where Luke was recuperating. There were no guards, no droids, nothing. As if two sentries posted at the entrance of the medcenter would be enough to keep their most valuable patient safe. Certainly, they wouldn’t be enough to keep him safe from X-7, who was waved along with a nod and a friendly grin.

These Rebels, so trusting.

So stupid.

X-7 reached into his pocket and wrapped his hand around the jet injector. Less than four centimeters long, it fit snugly in the palm of his hand. When X-7 placed a hand on his wounded friend's shoulder, no holocam would catch the tiny pinprick, the injection of two milliliters of Sennari, a toxin with lethal effects.

Sennari usually killed within seconds, but for situations like this, X-7 preferred to use a slow-acting variant of the poison. Luke would fade away in the night, long after X-7 had left the room. As the toxin was absorbed, organs would shut down, one by one. Within hours, the toxin would disappear from Luke's bloodstream, undetectable by even the most expert doctors. Luke's total system failure would appear a natural process. Unfortunate, unavoidable.

By morning, Luke would be dead.

And everyone would believe it was due to injuries sustained in the explosion.

Making Han Solo a murderer.

It had been frustrating to watch Luke survive the explosion, but maybe it was for the best, X-7 decided. Toxins were his preferred method of killing. Simple, direct—almost elegant. And no chance of error or escape.

X-7 prepared a suitably genial smile, in case Luke was awake. He opened the door.

A wave of rage crested over him, nearly knocking him off his feet. He was unused to such strong emotions. He was supposed to be *beyond* them. But it was impossible to remain calm.

The bed was empty.

The target—the weak, young, naive, *pathetic* target—was gone.

Which meant X-7 had failed again.

## Chapter Four

Luke landed the shuttle on a desolate stretch of sand, several kilometers from the nearest outpost of civilization. Of course, on Tatooine, “civilization” was a relative term.

“Are you quite certain that this is the best hiding spot for us, Master Luke?” The protocol droid C-3PO tottered out of the ship, followed by his astromech counterpart, R2-D2. He stood with his hands on his hips, glaring at the bleak desert landscape. They had landed at the edge of the Dune Sea, a sandy, windswept plain that stretched to the horizon. Bleached nearly white by the harsh Tatooine suns, the ocean of sand melded seamlessly into the pale, hazy sky. “This climate is dreadfully bad for my joints!”

R2-D2 beeped gleefully, wheeling circles around his golden friend, as Leia stretched.

“Easy for you to say,” C-3PO snapped. “You don’t have to worry about your language circuits getting sandclogged. I still don’t understand why we couldn’t hide in a nice civilized place, like Coruscant or Kuat. As it happens, I actually speak all six dialects of Kuat, including the rare—”

“We’re not going to Kuat,” Luke said irritably. “And we’re not *hiding*.” He brushed a hand through his hair, already dusted with sand. Away from his home planet, he had forgotten the way



the sand coated everything, inside and out. Luke squinted against the brutal twin suns and wiped the sweat off his forehead, smearing his face with sandy grit. Hard to believe he'd spent his whole life here. And yet, now that he was back, it was just as hard to believe he'd ever left. "We're here for Biggs."

True, no one in the Rebellion knew where they'd gone. And Leia was adamant that they not return to Yavin 4 until the Rebels had completed their investigation and discovered who wanted Luke dead. But Luke hadn't *run away* to Tatooine. He'd gotten a message the week before from his old friend Windy. The old gang was getting together, to mourn the death and celebrate the life of Biggs Darklighter. To remember the good old days.

The days before a TIE fighter blew Biggs out of the sky.

Luke had been there, seen it happen. One moment Biggs was there, the same confident flyboy he'd been back home, covering Luke as they attacked the Death Star.

Then, the next moment, nothing left but a cloud of debris, drifting into space.

Luke had promised Leia he wouldn't tell any of his old friends where he'd been these last few months, which meant he couldn't tell them of Biggs's last moments or his last act of heroism. But Luke was determined to give his old friend the sendoff he deserved.

He just had one stop to make first.

"This is where you lived?" Leia asked, trying to see past the ruined remnants of the moisture farm and imagine what the place must have looked like before it was destroyed. It would have been hard under any circumstances—the Empire had burned most of it, and looting Jawas had taken care of the rest. But it wasn't just that. Leia would never have admitted it, but to her, the whole planet looked like a pile of ruins. Broken buildings, broken people. She couldn't imagine anyone growing up here, much less Luke.

## Alex Wheeler

He nodded, pointing at the pile of crumbled pourstone. It was already half-covered by sand and Leia suspected that within a few years, the desert would have reclaimed all remnants of the Lars moisture farm. “My bedroom was over there,” Luke said. “Some of the vaporators were spread out, all along there. They were always breaking down, but it’s like Uncle Owen always says, ‘You want to be a moisture farmer, you have to—’”

He snapped his mouth shut.

“What?” Leia asked, when he didn’t continue.

Luke shook his head.

He didn’t have to explain any further. Leia had her own memories, her own ruined past. Sometimes it was hard to remember that the people you’d lost were gone forever. Sometimes it was impossible to forget.

They stood quietly for several long moments, the wind spraying a fine mist of sand in their faces. Even the droids knew better than to speak.

“Do you want to get closer?” Leia finally asked. “See if...there’s anything left to salvage?”

Luke hesitated for a moment, scanning the ruins, as if weighing the odds that anything could have survived the Imperial destruction. Then he gave himself a shake, and turned his back on his old home. Leia hurried after him as he headed toward the landspeeder. When she reached him, he offered her a smile—the first real smile she’d seen since they landed. “I think I have a better idea.”

X-7 stood in the middle of Luke’s quarters, an odd sensation churning in his gut: uncertainty.

He had volunteered his help with the investigation of the explosion. And, as an official part of that investigation, he’d ransacked Luke’s room. He’d scavenged through piles of Luke’s clothing; he’d torn apart Luke’s mattress. Searched everywhere for some record, some clue to where Luke and Leia might have gone.

And he'd come up empty.

He'd begun slicing Luke's encrypted computer files, but it would take some time. Meanwhile, he'd find a way to search Leia's room next. This would be harder to do without raising suspicion, but he'd get it done. That wasn't his concern.

His concern was that he wouldn't find anything there, either.

His concern was that Luke had slipped through his fingers, and X-7 wouldn't be able to hunt him down.

X-7 wouldn't be able to complete the mission he'd been given by his master.

And that meant X-7 would be punished.

As he had been punished before.

*"You've failed me," the Commander says.*

*X-7 squints into the blinding light. His master is a dark shadow, looming over him. X-7 is immobilized, pinned to the wall by durasteel binders. There is no escape from the Commander's wrath. But the binders are unnecessary. X-7 will bear his punishment. He belongs to the Commander. If the Commander wishes to destroy him, that is his right.*

*"The bounty hunter had been stalking the target for weeks," he reports. "He killed the target before I even arrived. There was nothing I could have done."*

*A sharp crack, as the Commander backhands him across the jaw. "No excuses!" he shouts. "You let someone else find the target first. You let someone kill him before he could be interrogated. There is no excuse for failure!"*

*But X-7 is explaining, not excusing. Only frightened men make excuses, and X-7 has no fear. The Commander took that from him, along with every other emotion, long ago. For X-7, there are only facts. Events. And results. Except that the only acceptable result is success.*

*And he has failed.*

*He waits for death.*

*"I've put too much time and money into training you," the Commander mutters. "But obviously it wasn't enough. Your training will continue."*

## Alex Wheeler

*X-7 knows what this means. Back in the dark cell that has been home for as long as he can remember. Back to the battles with carnivorous danchafs and ravenous reeks. Back to the neural shock treatments, frying his system again and again, until there was nothing left but the urge to follow orders. Back to the possibility of death lurking around every corner, behind every door.*

*“But first, you will be punished for your failure,” the Commander says.*

*The Commander draws out his tools. The Neuronic whip. The Fire blade. The force pike. The nerve disrupter. And the Treppus-2 vibroblade.*

*A droid could have accomplished this task with ease, but the Commander prefers to administer punishments himself.*

*X-7 is unafraid. The Commander’s displeasure worms inside of him, acid that eats him from within. His failure is a physical fact, a physical pain. There is nothing to life but pleasing the Commander; failing him is worse than death. Worse than anything imaginable. The Commander lifts the vibroblade. His favorite. X-7 closes his eyes, believing he has nothing more to fear.*

*He is wrong.*

“This is your better idea?” Leia asked, stepping over a pile of womp rat dung as they wound their way through a desolate assemblage of decrepit pourstone dwellings. Luke had called Anchorhead a small settlement, but as far as Leia could tell, it was barely more than a power station and a couple of cantinas. All looked deserted.

“Come on!” Luke said happily, hurrying to the power station. “I bet the guys are already inside.”

Leia looked dubiously at the low-slung building. The rickety walls and decaying roof seemed to be on the verge of collapse; anyone inside might well be risking their life. “You sure your friends will be *here*?” Leia asked, glancing at the heap of spare parts and prototype droids rusting by the door. On the other side of the entrance, a gaunt, sickly dewback tugged weakly at the fraying rope tying him to the tether post.

"Where else would they be?" Luke asked, grinning. "Aw, Tosche Station's great, you'll see."

There was a dull metallic roar as a massive sandcrawler rolled past the station. C-3PO cast a fearful look at the machine. R2-D2 issued an alarmed series of beeps.

"What are you two so worried about?" Luke asked. "It's just a bunch of Jawas."

"*Precisely* what I'm afraid of," C-3PO replied. "I knew coming to this planet was a bad idea. Why, we're surrounded by potential dangers! If we had only—"

"You know, there's a machine shop around back," Luke said quickly. "Why don't you and Artoo go see if they can buff up your platings and outfit you with some fresh recharge couplings?"

C-3PO straightened up. "Now that you mention it, it *has* been far too long since my last tune-up. And all this sand is *not* helping matters." He brushed an imaginary fleck of dust off his shoulder. "Did you hear that?" C-3PO boasted to his counterpart as they hurried around the back. "Master Luke is always looking out for our best interests."

R2-D2 trilled and beeped.

"He is most certainly *not* trying to get rid of us!" C-3PO said indignantly.

Leia suppressed a smile. It dropped away as soon as she stepped into Tosche Station. The inside was even more cluttered and dirty than she would have expected. Dimly lit, with low ceilings and peeling walls, the station was packed full of overstuffed shelves and bins. Every spare surface was covered with grease and spare parts. There was a long counter toward the front, presumably for customers, when there were any. But the station was mostly empty, save for a few figures in the back, lounging around an old holopool table. They all looked up as the door opened.

"Skywalker!" one of them roared, jumping up from the table and throwing his arms around his old friend.

## Alex Wheeler

“Miss me, Windy?” Luke asked, grinning.

“Missed beating you at holopool,” a burly young man said, chuckling as he drove a knuckle into Luke’s shoulder. He dragged Luke over to the table, pounding him on the back. “Skywalker’s back!” he announced. “All hail the conquering Wormie!” The group burst into a mocking cheer.

“You never mentioned your nickname was *Wormie*,” Leia whispered, trying not to laugh.

Luke flushed red and shrugged. As he introduced her to his friends, Leia struggled to keep the jumble of names and faces straight. The burly man was Fixer, a mechanic who ran Tosche Station, when there was any business to do, which was rarely. Next came Camie, who was gazing at Fixer and tossing sweet dweezels into his gaping mouth. Windy and Deak, who Leia couldn’t tell apart—but since they kept repeating each other, she supposed it didn’t matter. And, silent in the corner, Jaxson, his flat head, squarish jaw, and dead stare giving him the look of a droid.

Leia noticed Luke give him an odd look, but Luke replaced it with a smile before anyone else could notice. “And this is Leia,” Luke said, when the introductions were complete. “My, uh, copilot.” They had agreed that no one needed to know that Leia was *Leia Organa*, Princess of Alderaan and founding member of the Rebel Alliance.

“So, tell us about it, Luke!” Windy urged him.

“About what?”

“Everything,” Windy said. “What it’s like up there!” He pointed to the ceiling.

“Same as down here,” Jaxson said, scowling. “Whole galaxy’s the same, from one end to the other.”

“Like you’d know,” Fixer teased. “You’ve never been farther from home than Mos Espa—and you only ended up there because you got lost on your way home from Beggar’s Canyon.”

Jaxson didn’t laugh.

"I thought you were shipping out to the Academy," Luke said. "What happened?"

Jaxson shrugged. "Changed my mind. This is my home. Not ashamed of where I come from, unlike some people."

"Changed his tune, he means," Fixer said, still chuckling. "Right after he failed his entrance exams."

A sudden, awkward silence descended over the table, broken only by Camie's tinkling giggle.

Deak cleared his throat, looking uncomfortable. "So, tell us about it, Skywalker. What have you been doing all this time?"

"Yeah, Wormie, wow us," Jaxson added. "You find yourself a good job cleaning out the dianoga dung on a garbage scow?"

"More like smuggling spice through the Outer Rim and swindling Hutts from here to Barabi," Luke boasted.

Leia shot him a sharp glance. They'd agreed on a cover story—that Luke had found a job as a mechanic at a distant shipping outpost. What was Luke doing?

Fixer snorted. "Yeah, right, Wormie. And I'm an Imperial admiral, shipping out next week to command my own Star Destroyer."

"It's true!" Luke said hotly. "You should see my ship. Fastest in the sector. We've done the Kessel Run in less than twelve—I mean, *eleven* parsecs!"

Leia tried not to roll her eyes. Boasts like this were one thing coming from a laserbrained spacer like Han—but coming from Luke, they sounded downright ridiculous. His friends looked like they felt the same way.

All except Camie. "Really?" she asked, looking intrigued.

"How'd you get your hands on a ship?" Deak asked.

Jaxson rolled his eyes. "As if Skywalker could really go up against a Hutt," he scoffed. "Wormie probably hasn't even been offworld—he's probably been hiding out in Mos Espa, cleaning 'freshers.'"

"Not many 'fresher-cleaners with a hundred thousand credit bounty on their heads," Leia snapped.

## Alex Wheeler

Luke looked at her in surprise.

"Why don't you tell them about the time you rescued us from the Imperials on Bimmisaari, Luke," she suggested, giving Luke a quick wink. "Or how you nabbed that shipment of glitterstim from the gang of Rodians on Kubindi."

Windy and Deak's eyes widened in amazement. Camie turned the full blast of her adoring gaze onto Luke. Even Fixer seemed impressed. "You really managed to score yourself a freighter?" he asked Luke. "Running with the spice smugglers and everything? How'd you manage that?"

Luke grinned—not his familiar earnest smile, but a cocky curl of the lips in perfect imitation of Han Solo. He lowered his voice. "Okay, boys, you want the real story? If you promise not to spread it around...?"

They nodded eagerly, and Luke began spinning a tale Leia had heard many times from Han, about a death-defying run-in with some rival smugglers on the Bubble Cliffs of Nezmi. She smiled to herself. Luke's friends were looking at him like he was a hero. Sure, everything out of Luke's mouth was a lie, but the hero part was absolutely true.

"You stole a blaster shipment from the *Empire*?" Jaxson interrupted Luke angrily. "That's treason!"

"Aw, go crink yourself, Jaxson," Fixer said. "Like the kriffing Empire doesn't have enough blasters. Let him finish the story."

"Tell the truth, Luke," Windy said. "Did you steal those weapons for the Rebellion? You can tell us."

"Yeah, you can tell *us*," Deak seconded.

Luke offered them only a mysterious shrug. "Can't say who hired me for the job. Smuggler's code."

"Think the Alliance could use another smuggler?" Windy asked. "I'm not a bad pilot myself."

Deak shoved him. "Then how come you just crashed your third skyhopper this year?"

Jaxson smacked his hand down on the table. "You're all going to sit here and joke about joining up with that bunch of



cowardly traitors?” he growled. “Today, of all days? We’re here for Biggs, aren’t we? He’d be ashamed of you all.”

“Biggs gave his *life* for the Rebellion!” Luke blurted.

“Luke,” Leia said quietly, hoping to remind him that he wasn’t supposed to know how Biggs had died. He certainly couldn’t admit to seeing it for himself. If anyone suspected Luke had been present for the Death Star explosion, he’d be in even more danger.

“Biggs was an officer in the Imperial Navy,” Jaxson shot back. “He gave his life for the *Empire*, not your band of kriffing traitors.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Luke said, teeth gritted and face pale.

“If you’re right,” Jaxson said, “then he died a traitor. And the galaxy’s better off without him.” Camie gasped. Fixer glared, as Windy and Deak looked like they wanted to crawl under the table.

Luke balled his left hand into a fist. His right hand reached for his lightsaber. Leia grabbed his arm. “Luke, let it go,” she urged him in a whisper.

He shook her off. “Say that again,” he ordered Jaxson, in a low, dangerous voice. “I dare you.”

## Chapter Five

Griggs Pe’et?” Han said, approaching a booth in the cantina’s back corner inhabited by a grizzled Balosar. The creature wiggled its retractable antennapalps. Han had met a few Balosars in his day—it was a duplicitous, cowardly, greedy species, and he expected Griggs would be no exception. “Han Solo,” he introduced himself, sliding into a seat. Chewbacca stayed on his feet, standing guard. “You said you wanted the best? You got him.”

The Balosar had contacted the *Falcon* shortly after the ship jumped away from Yavin 4. He was looking for someone with “very particular skills” to acquire a “very particular package”—and he’d been told Han was the man to do it.

That was it. No details about the potential job or the potential fee. Just a name, Griggs Pe’et, and a time and location. Fourteen hundred hours, in a small gambling joint on Tythe, take it or leave it.

Han wasn’t in the habit of taking jobs from just anyone.

Just anyone who could pay.

So he and Chewbacca had jumped to the Arkanis sector, and here he was. Ready for something new.

Kislov's Gambling Palace was a dead end club on a dead end planet, filled with dead-eyed spacers looking to make a quick buck. The room was claustrophobic and musty, the muttering quiet punctuated by the occasional shout of protest about a cheating sabacc dealer. (In Han's experience, *all* sabacc dealers cheated—it was your own fault if you played without knowing the rules of the game.) A dour Ychthyonian sloshed drinks behind the bar, juggling mugs of grog and caf in each of his four hands. The club looked like a gundark nest and smelled like wet bantha fur.

Han felt right at home.

"As we speak, an Imperial transport is ferrying a valuable shipment to the Imperial satellite station in the Zoma system," the Balosar said in a hushed tone.

"Shipment of what?" Han asked.

"That is not your concern yet," Griggs Pe'et said. "Your only concern is that *I* want the shipment—and I'm willing to pay for it."

"Oh yeah? How much?" Han asked.

"Ten thousand," Pe'et offered.

Han laughed. "You want me to infiltrate an Imperial station for ten thousand? You some kind of comedian?"

Chewbacca growled.

"Don't worry, buddy, I'm sure he was just kidding around," Han said. "No need to tear his arms off." He leaned toward the Balosar. "That's the thing about Wookiees. They can't take a joke. So how about we talk about the *real* price."

"What did you have in mind?" Pe'et hissed.

Han named a price that was double his usual—just enough to pay back Jabba, with a little leftover for a new exhaust port on the *Falcon*.

The alien's antennapalps began to vibrate, shuddering so hard Han half-expected his head to split in two. Pe'et frowned. "You drive a hard bargain, Solo. I could get ten men to do it for half that."

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Han shrugged. "You want the best, you pay for the best." He jerked his head at Chewbacca, and they stood up together. "But if you'd rather find someone else—"

"Wait," the Balosar barked. "I'll pay. *When* I get the shipment."

"You'll pay half up front," Han said. "Or no deal."

Pe'et nodded. "Then we have an agreement?"

"We have an *offer*," Han said, enjoying himself. It felt good to be back in his element, doing what he did best. "My partner and I will have to discuss it."

The alien nodded again, then stared at them, as if waiting.

"*Alone*," Han said.

Griggs Pe'et stood up, muttering something about why he hated dealing with humans. He tossed a datacard down on the table. "This will tell you how to reach me. I'll need a decision by tonight."

Once they were alone, Han kicked back in his chair, propping his legs on the table. "Looks like we got ourselves a job, buddy," he said contentedly.

Chewbacca barked a question.

"What's to discuss?" Han asked. "He's got credits, we've got a ship."

Chewbacca growled.

"All we *need* to know about him is that he's willing to pay us forty thousand," Han said.

Chewbacca growled again, and Han rolled his eyes.

"No, it's got nothing to do with the fact that it's an *Imperial* station," Han said. "I told you, I don't care what Leia and the rest of them think of me."

Chewbacca issued a low moan.

"Well of *course* we'll let them know if we find out something that can help," Han said irritably. "But that's not why I'm doing it. This is just a job, that's it."

"And Han Solo *never* lies down on the job," a familiar voice growled from behind him. "Ain't that right?"

Han reached for his weapon—then froze as he felt the cold muzzle of a blaster press against the back of his neck.

The Balosar crept into the dim alley behind the gambling club, his palm extended. The man in the tattered gray robe was waiting, his face still shrouded by a heavy hood.

“He says he needs to think it over,” Griggs Pe’et said. “But if I know Solo, he’ll take the job. You got my payment?”

The man slipped a credit chip out of his utility belt. “You’ll find an additional ten thousand, to cover your silence,” he said. “You’ll get the rest when Captain Solo accepts the job. And, as agreed, if Solo is successful, you can keep the shipment.”

The Balosar shoved the chip into a fold in his loose-fitting robe. “I still don’t get it. You hire *me* to hire *Solo*, to steal a shipment that you don’t even want? Doesn’t make any sense.”

“It doesn’t have to make sense. Not to you,” the man said. “You just have to give Solo the coordinates of the Imperial station and then forget you ever met me.”

“Met who?” the Balosar asked, and slipped away into the darkness.

The man waited a moment, tipping his face up, as if breathing in the night. Only once he’d assured himself that he was truly alone, did he speak. “It is done.”

## Chapter Six

Jaxson slammed his glass down on the table. He narrowed his eyes and leaned across the table toward Luke. “I *said*, the Rebellion is full of traitors,” he repeated. “So if Biggs was a Rebel, then he was a traitor, too.”

Luke stood up. “That’s enough!”

“Oh yeah?” Jaxson asked, rising to his feet. He stood several centimeters taller than Luke, and his arms were broad and muscled from long days working on his family’s moisture farm. “You gonna stop me, Wormie?”

“Maybe I am,” Luke said, balling his fists.

“Guys, take it easy,” Windy said.

“Luke, just let it go,” Leia advised.

“Yeah, Luke,” Jaxson simpered, in a parody of Leia’s voice. “Be a good little boy and let it go.”

Luke knew he should listen to Leia.

But.

*Han wouldn’t let it go*, he thought to himself. And after all, he’d told all his friends he was a pilot now, a smuggler, a tough and dangerous guy. Shouldn’t he act the part?

Shouldn’t he defend Biggs’s honor, the only way a tough and dangerous smuggler would know how?

“Biggs was a hero,” Luke said. And then he punched Jaxson in the stomach.

“Oooof!” Jaxson wheezed, doubling over. But in an instant, he was upright again, fists swinging wildly. He lunged at Luke. Windy jumped into the fight, trying to separate the two. Jaxson swung, Luke ducked, and Windy took the blow on his chin. He wheeled backward, slamming into Fixer, who toppled over in his chair.

“Watch it!” Fixer shouted, climbing to his feet and lashing out at Windy.

The station was still mostly empty, but there were a few stragglers loitering around the table who’d been waiting too long for a good fight. In Anchorhead, not much else ever broke the monotony of the day. Soon they were all on their feet, cheering and stomping and throwing punches and kicks at random.

A slim, rat-faced Ranat went sailing through the air and crashed through a window, spraying the station with a shower of transparisteel. There were a few cries of “traitor!” and “Imperial slime!” but it was obvious that most people didn’t know what the fight was about nor did they care. Tosche Station was filling up, as passersby heard the commotion and hurried in to join the fun. A stocky, muscled woman slung a punch at a bedraggled Ryn, who broke a chair over the head of a scruffy human with a patch across his left eye. Leia pressed herself into a corner, rolling her eyes at a trio of Dugs, who were taking turns stomping on each others’ heads.

But in the center of the chaos, Luke hadn’t forgotten what was at stake. Jaxson wrapped an arm around his neck and twisted him into a choke hold. Luke gasped for breath. “This is what we do to traitors!” Jaxson growled.

Luke stomped down hard on Jaxson’s instep, then dug an elbow sharply into his stomach. Jaxson flinched and his grip loosened, only for a moment, enough time for Luke to wriggle out of his grasp. Jaxson swung his fists, but Luke darted out of the way, and none of the blows landed. Luke ducked behind

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Jaxson and wrapped his arms around the larger man's waist, twisting him off balance and kicking his legs out from under him. Jaxson toppled to the ground with a thump and clatter. With a roar, he snatched Luke's ankle and yanked with all his strength. Luke went flying.

The thunderous crack of laserfire hitting the ceiling made everyone pause and look up. A large man emerged from the back room, hoisting a blaster. The first shot had gone straight up. But now he had the muzzle aimed out at the crowd. Merl Tosche spent as little time at the power station as he could afford to do. But when he was at work, he hated to be disturbed. "Enough!" he roared.

With a shrug and a grin, the fighters dusted themselves off, shook hands, and slunk out of the station. That was the thing about most fights on Tatooine—it didn't take much to get them started, but it took even less to end them.

Most, but not all. Luke wasn't ready to give up. Neither was Jaxson.

Windy grabbed Luke by the shoulders and pulled him to his feet. Jaxson lunged forward, but Deak grabbed his shirt and dragged him backward. The two glared at each other.

"You children done playing?" Leia asked dryly, gazing at the debris strewn across the station. A rickety JR-8 maintenance droid was already sweeping away the worst of it, sucking shattered fuel cells and puddles of spilled ruby bliel into its hollow durasteel belly.

"This isn't a game," Luke said.

"No, it's not," Jaxson agreed.

Windy forced a grin and slapped Luke awkwardly on the back. "Let's forget the whole thing," he suggested. "Empire, Rebellion, who cares? What's that got to do with us?"

"Yeah," Fixer agreed. "Whoever's running the galaxy, the suns will keep rising and the vaporators will keep sucking moisture. Vader can't bring water to the desert, any more than



the Rebels can tame a krayt dragon. Tatooine will always be Tatooine.”

“Fixer’s right,” Camie said, slipping her arms around her fiancé and nestling her head on his shoulder. “It’s not our problem.”

Luke shook his head. “You don’t understand. If you knew what was really going on out there—”

“Like *you* know?” Jaxson scoffed. “You think you’re so much smarter than us because you left and we stayed? You walk away from your responsibilities to run around the galaxy playing space pilot, and you want to come back here and tell us *we* don’t understand?”

“That’s not what I meant,” Luke protested.

“You think you’re so special, just because you can pilot a ship,” Jaxson jeered. “But I’m a better pilot than you any day.”

Luke scowled. “I’ve seen you fly,” he retorted. “You couldn’t drive a skyhopper twenty meters without crashing into a dune.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah!”

“You think you’re so much better? How about you prove it!” Jaxson challenged.

“Anytime, any place,” Luke said.

“Tomorrow. Race in Beggar’s Canyon. We’ll thread the Needle. At least, *one* of us will.”

Luke hesitated.

“Scared?” Jaxson jeered.

“Scared for *you*, maybe.” Only two people had ever successfully threaded the Needle. Luke was one of them; Jaxson wasn’t the other.

“Jaxson, don’t be crazy!” Camie squealed.

“Yeah, you got nothing to prove,” Windy added. He’d been in the cockpit the first time Luke had threaded the Needle, and he still looked traumatized by the memory.

Jaxson ignored them, keeping his eyes fixed on Luke. “You in?”

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"Tomorrow at sunset," Luke said. "If you're crazy enough to go through with it." He stalked out of the station without waiting for a response. A moment later, Leia came up behind him and gently rested a hand on his shoulder. He shrugged her off.

"I'm fine," he said, and turned around. There was nothing gentle in her expression.

"I wasn't going to ask if you were *fine*," she snapped. "I was going to ask if you were *crazy*. We came here to keep you safe, and what's the first thing you do? Start a stupid fight over nothing!"

"It's not nothing," Luke protested. "You heard him."

Leia shook her head in disgust. "I thought you knew better than that," she chided him. "You were acting like a child in there. No, worse, you were acting like *Han*."

Luke brightened. "You think so?"

"That's *not* a compliment." Leia rubbed her hands across her eyes in exhaustion. "This isn't like you."

"Maybe that's the point," Luke said. "*Han* never runs away from danger. But here I am, hiding out here like a scared profrog."

"*Han* ran away from *us*!" Leia pointed out. "Or are you forgetting?"

"He had his reasons," Luke said, wishing he knew what they were. "And that's not the point. The point is, I'm not running away again. Especially not from the Needle. That doesn't scare me."

"Why do I get the feeling that it should?" Leia asked. "What is it?"

Luke told her about the canyon, a long, jagged gash in the desert that had once been a part of the old Boonta Eve Classic Podrace circuit. With its alarmingly sharp twists and turns, it made the perfect training ground for aspiring pilots. Luke had spent plenty of hours out there, practicing his maneuvers and using womp rats for target practice.

Then there was the Needle.

"The Stone Needle's nearly twenty meters high," Luke explained, "and most racers go around it. But if you can manage to slip through the eye of the Needle, you can shave four, maybe five seconds off your time." Not to mention, prove that you were the boldest and best pilot around.

"So why doesn't everyone go through the Needle?" Leia asked, like she already knew the answer.

"Well...lots of people *try*," Luke admitted. "But it's risky. If you're off by even a meter..."

As he spoke, Leia's lips pressed tighter and tighter together. Her cheeks blazed red.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "*No*. That's too risky."

"Aw, it's no risk for me," Luke said. "I've done it before. It's a piece of pika cake. After what I've done? The Podrace on Muunilinst? The Death—"

Leia silenced him with a look, and cast a meaningful glance over her shoulder. Luke tensed, as the hairs on the back of his neck stood to attention. He was suddenly convinced that someone was watching them. But the streets of Anchorhead were deserted.

"Anyway, that was different," Leia said impatiently. "You were risking your life for something important. Not to show off."

"*This* is important," Luke insisted. "It's not about whether I'm a better pilot. It's not even about me. You know who was the first person to ever thread the Needle? Biggs. This is for *him*. Maybe I can't tell anyone how he died—I can't prove that he died a hero. But I can do this. I can do this for him."

"This Jaxson guy..." Leia shook her head. "That's some friend you've got there."

Luke bristled. "He's not *my* friend. We never used to hang around with him, but...I guess a lot's changed since I left."

"Not that much," Leia said, offering a half smile. "He's still not your friend."

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Luke laughed hesitantly, not sure if that meant she wasn't angry anymore.

"You're telling me that you really believe if you beat Jaxson in a skyhopper race, you'll be proving that Biggs is a hero?" she asked, dead serious again.

Luke nodded.

"And that if you don't race, or if you lose, it will mean to all of your friends that Jaxson's right about the Alliance and about Biggs?"

Luke nodded again.

"You do realize that makes no sense, right?" she asked.

"Not to you, maybe," Luke said quietly.

"But it does to you?"

Luke nodded a third time, and when he raised his head, he held her gaze steadily.

Leia breathed out a sigh, then grinned. "In that case...I guess you'd better win."

## Chapter Seven

Far across the Western Dune Sea stood a fortress, whose population of guards, chefs, dancers, thieves, and slaves was several times that of Anchorhead. In the bowels of the palace, spider-like creatures skittered through the murky depths, each one's mechanical arms powered by a brain in a jar. These were all that remained of the B'omarr monks, who had erected the great fortress centuries before. Now they clung to the shadows, while another usurped the seat of their power.

The usurper required a very large seat.

"Who's next?" Jabba the Hutt roared in Huttese from his massive throne. The groveling courtiers who packed his throne room shrank away from the slug's booming voice. He slapped his tail impatiently against the dais, so hard that the floor beneath him vibrated. Jabba was the sector's biggest crime lord, the shadowy force behind every dirty deal in the sector. His power was such that with a word, he could bring down governments, torpedo corporations, and, if he chose to do so, perhaps destroy a small city.

But the obese Hutt's favorite games were those he could play from home; his favorite toys were the ones who cowered before

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his throne, begging for mercy. Too stupid to know it would never be granted.

A thin, stooped human shivered under his glare. Jabba smiled, his mouth widening enough so that he could have swallowed up the man whole. He was always glad to see a human; they tended to be the stupidest of all. And the most fun.

A thick scar crawled from beneath the collar of the human's ragged brown tunic. It traversed the length of his neck and split his weathered face down the middle.

"You dare interrupt my dessert?" Jabba asked. One of Jabba's servants dangled a wriggling gorg over the Hutt's open mouth. Jabba's massive tongue tickled the gorg. At Jabba's command, the servant let the creature drop. It disappeared, squealing and keening, into Jabba's gaping maw. He swallowed it with a loud gulp. "Speak!" he commanded.

The human mumbled something, but his words were drowned out by the chattering and chuckling of Jabba's court.

"Louder!" Jabba said. "Rancor got your tongue? Because that can be arranged. HO! HO! HO!" There was a brief pause, and then the room burst into laughter. Jabba raised his twig-like arm, and the sound stopped abruptly.

"Honorable Jabba," the man muttered in Huttese, only a bit louder than the first time. "Thank you for this audience. I've come to report that Luke Skywalker has returned to Tatooine. He's in Anchorhead!"

"*Who?* What do I care about Luke Skyhopper?" Jabba roared. "Seize him," he ordered his Gamorrean guards. "The rancor needs his supper."

"Wait!" the man cried, as a phalanx of brutish Gamorreans closed in on him, their green snouts snuffling eagerly at the thought of another kill. "Luke Skywalker is a known associate of Han Solo!"

A murmur rippled through the room. Jabba's hatred of Solo was well known. The pilot had crossed him one too many times,

and Jabba had offered a reward for any information leading to his capture.

“Solo?” Jabba hissed, gobbling down another gorg. He turned to Bib Fortuna, his trusted second in command. “Is this true?”

The Twi’lek nodded, his long, fleshy tentacles swirling around his neck. “We’ve received reports that the two are close. Skywalker’s been traveling with the *Millennium Falcon*. If he’s on Tatooine...”

“Then Solo must be close,” Jabba said, gurgling with pleasure. Soon Han Solo’s body would be hanging on Jabba’s wall, a reminder to all of what happened when you betrayed the ruler of the Hutts. “This Skycrabber will lead us to Solo.” They would snatch the human, use him as bait. Solo would come running.

And if he didn’t...well, you could never have enough slaves.

All Jabba needed was the right bounty hunter for the job. He snatched a Klatooine paddy frog from the tank at his feet, crushing it into a pulp and stuffing it into his maw. As the salty reptile juice ran down his bloated face, he realized he had just the creature for the job. “Get me Bossk,” he commanded. And at his word, two of the Gamorreans went running. The Trandoshan bounty hunter would show his scaly face by nightfall. Or suffer the consequences.

“Still here?” Jabba shouted at the human cowering before him.

Shaking, the man mumbled something under his breath.

Bib Fortuna leaned toward Jabba. “The human wants his reward,” he hissed.

“Reward?” Jabba asked loudly. “*Reward?* HO HO! This human wants a reward!” Again, the room laughed with Jabba. And kept laughing as Jabba pressed a button on the end of his long hookah pipe.

The human cowered, squeezing his eyes shut, and the laughing grew even louder. But he wasn’t in pain...yet. Still

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shaking, he opened his eyes to see a small pile of credits in front of him.

“Thank you, Honorable Jabba,” the man murmured, bowing low and piling the credits into his threadbare tunic, “you truly are the greatest of the Hutts.” He kept bowing as he scuttled out of the room, a few credits scattering in his wake.

As the laughter swelled, the band struck up another tune, filling the room with jaunty music. Jabba snapped his fingers for another gorg, when Bib Fortuna leaned and whispered into his ear.

“Another one?” Jabba asked. “Make him wait.”

Bib Fortuna hesitated. “But this one, he has...debts.”

Jabba smiled. “Very well. Send him in.”

A Toydarian buzzed into the room, flitting nervously and looking over his shoulder, taking in the courtiers and henchmen.

Jabba began to shake with laughter. “Block the exits! I will now have my justice.”



## Chapter Eight

It wasn't the first time Han had felt the cold durasteel of a blaster muzzle against his skin. When it came to life and death situations, he was an old pro.

Still, all things considered, he'd rather be playing a hand of sabacc.

"Hands in the air, and turn around," the voice said. "*Slowly.*"

Han raised his hands and turned. *Slowly.*

The blaster was a Merr-Sonn J-1 Happy Surprise hold-out model, small enough to fit in the palm of a hand, useless at distances of more than three meters. Deadly at point-blank range. A pale, stubby finger was itching to pull the trigger. And attached to it, the hand, the arm, the shoulder, the face of a man Han hadn't seen in years. A man whose last words to Han had been, "Next time I see you, you're dead."

Han grinned.

Chewbacca roared in frustration, knowing that the wrong move could get Han killed.

"Would you shut that Wookiee up!" the man yelled, pressing the blaster to Han's forehead. A few of the other gamblers looked over, then shrugged and turned back to their gaming tables. In a place like this, you didn't pay too much attention to

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what anyone else was doing. Not if you wanted to walk out in one piece.

"Easy, Chewie," Han said, hoping that the Wookiee wouldn't do anything rash. "Lore here isn't going to shoot me, are you, Lore?"

Chewbacca barked a question.

"Yeah, Lore and I go *way* back," Han said, winking at his assailant. "Long time no see, Lore. How's it going?"

"Better, now." Avik Lore—failed musician, failed gambler, failed cantina owner, successful smuggler—snarled at Han.

"Don't tell me you're still mad about that little incident back on Dubrillon," Han said wearily.

Lore's eyes widened. "*Incident?* You shot me!"

Han shrugged. "Not on purpose," he pointed out. "Besides, it was just a flesh wound. Don't be such a baby."

"I couldn't sit down for a month!"

Chewbacca let loose a hiccupy gurgle that Han knew was suppressed Wookiee laughter. Lore shot him a sharp glance. Chewbacca pounded his chest in a good imitation of a Wookiee not at all amused.

"How was I supposed to know it was you behind that door?" Han wheedled. "I thought it was the G'looth Brothers!"

"You could have *asked*," Lore said. "You could have knocked. Or you could have opened the door and taken a peek before you let loose with your blaster. You could have done a million things."

"Could have," Han said. "Didn't."

Lore sighed. "I know, I know, rule number one—"

"Always shoot first," Han finished with him. "And I always do. Best way to keep breathing."

"Not when you're the one who gets shot," Lore growled.

Han was getting tired of staring down the barrel of a blaster just because Lore was a little grouchy about some flesh wound from a hundred years ago. Slowly, Lore's blaster tracing his every

move, Han rose to his feet. "Look, friend, fun as this little reunion has been—"

"Who said you could stand up?"

"Well now, I don't know," Han mused, raising his left hand as if to scratch his chin in thought. "Who said that?" Ever so slowly, he let his fingers creep toward his forehead, toward the muzzle of the blaster, until—

"Hey!" Lore shouted, as Han wrapped a hand around the muzzle. "You think I won't shoot you?"

"No..." While Lore was distracted by the tussle over his weapon, Han's right hand darted to his holster and whipped out his DL-44 heavy blaster, optimized for quick draw capabilities. "Not if I fire first," he said, grinning, his blaster held steady, inches from Lore's face.

Lore's blaster didn't wobble.

"You think you're faster on the trigger than me?" Lore challenged.

Han grinned. "Either I can prove it to you, or you can lower your blaster, and I'll lower my blaster, and you can buy me a bottle of lum."

Lore squinted, knitting his eyebrows together like two wriggling hagworms. "*You're* buying," he said finally.

"Done," Han said. "On three?"

They counted down together.

"One..."

"Two..."

"Three—" On three, each man blasted a hole in the wall, just behind the other's head.

"Just a warning," they said, in sync, then burst into laughter.

Han slapped his old friend on the back. "Always good to see you, Lore. So how about that lum you're buying me?"

"*You're* buying," Lore said, sliding comfortably into a seat next to Chewbacca. The Wookiee glared suspiciously and grumbled under his breath.

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"Don't mind Chewie," Han said, waving over a serving droid and ordering a round of drinks and a bowl of won-wons for the Wookiee. "He doesn't like it when people try to shoot me."

"I know how he feels," Lore said ruefully, rubbing the site of his old blaster wound.

Chewbacca took a large gulp of won-wons and growled.

"Long before your time," Han replied. "Lore and I met when I saved him from an angry nexu."

"He was only angry because you blew up his cave!" Lore reminded Han, launching into the story of the carnivorous beast.

Han laughed as the memories came flooding back. It felt good to talk about old times, times before he'd met Luke or Leia, before he'd gotten all tangled up with the Rebel Alliance. Back then his only worry had been when the next job would come in, and his only cause had been himself.

"Hey, Lore, you got anything going on?" he asked suddenly, the beginnings of an idea taking shape.

"Got a routine run to Siskeen for a shipment of rock wart eggs," Lore said. "Could do it in my sleep."

"What if I had something more...interesting?" Han asked, leaning forward and lowering his voice. Chewbacca issued a warning growl, but Han ignored him. Sure, Lore was a little rough around the edges, but that was part of his charm. "I've got a job coming up," Han confided, "a big one. And I could use a little of your brand of help."

Chewbacca growled louder.

"Lore knows this sector like the back of his hand," Han pointed out. "And I know he's not afraid to tangle with some Imperials—not if the price is right."

Lore's ears perked up. "And the price would be?"

"Twenty thousand," Han lied. "Split down the middle, seventy-thirty."

"Last I checked, the middle's a little closer to fifty," Lore said.

Han grinned. "My job—my math."

"Sixty-forty," Lore proposed. "And I might just know where you can get some Imperial docking codes. You're pulling one on the Empire, that could come in handy."

Han glanced at Chewbacca. "What do you think, buddy?"

Chewbacca made it clear he didn't think much of it—not the idea, not Avik Lore. But he'd come around. Han grasped Lore's hand, and they shook on it. "Just like the good old days," he said happily.

Lore winced and, once again, brushed his fingers against his old blaster scars. "Let's hope not."

The man in the gray, hooded robe slipped out of the gambling club, satisfied. Han Solo would take the job. He would infiltrate the Imperial satellite station, and while there, he would find...

Well, that was the question, wasn't it?

The man returned to the alley behind the club. These days, he felt more comfortable in the shadows. "I still don't like this," he said, to the open air.

He paused for a moment, feeling rather silly, waiting for a response that might never come.

"We agreed on this course." The figure shimmering before him was solid and not solid, there and not there, all at the same time. He glowed with an inner light, and yet the night remained dark. "Search yourself, Ferus. You know this is right."

"Perhaps. But it feels wrong." Ferus Olin was decades away from his apprenticeship at the Jedi Temple, a sanctuary that no longer existed. And yet, even from beyond the grave, Master Obi-Wan Kenobi still had the ability to make him feel like a rebellious Padawan. Not that Ferus had ever *been* a rebellious Padawan. He'd done everything he was told, accepted every order without question, performed every task perfectly and without hesitation—until the day he'd made a fateful mistake, and someone had been killed. Not just someone. A friend.

*And not just my mistake, he thought. Anakin's, too.*

## Alex Wheeler

Ferus had walked away from the Jedi Order. Forever, he thought. And yet here he was, decades later, learning at the feet of a Master all over again.

He had gotten a valuable lesson all those years ago, the day Thel-Tanis had died. Sometimes a wrong decision can get someone killed. Ferus had vowed never to make such a decision again.

Yet he'd made several.

"Whatever information is on that station, I can get it myself," he said. "There's no reason to risk Han's life."

"The life is his to risk," Obi-Wan said. "The decision his to make."

"But we're not *giving* him a decision!" Ferus countered. "We're manipulating him."

After nearly two decades undercover on Alderaan, looking out for Princess Leia's safety, Ferus had struck out on his own. Darth Vader was on the trail of the pilot who had blown up the Death Star, and he couldn't be allowed to discover the truth. If he found Luke—if he guessed the truth—all would be lost.

Ferus was on the trail of First Lieutenant Slej Hant, an Imperial officer whom Vader had assigned to ferret out the information. But as he passed through the Arkanis sector, one of Ferus's informants had tipped him off about another Imperial on the same mission. According to the informant, a high-ranking officer had parked himself on a satellite station in the Zoma system, a nearly forgotten outpost that would keep him far from Vader's prying eye. Ferus's spy claimed that the man was desperate to find the Death Star's destroyer before Vader did...and he was getting close.

But so was Slej Hant, and he was about to take off for the Subterrel sector, a far-flung corner of space beyond the Outer Rim. An Imperial agent could have no possible business there.

Unless he was headed for Polis Massa, the arid, remote planetoid where Luke Skywalker and Leia Organa had been born.

## STAR WARS: Renegade

Ferus was torn. Worried as he was about this other Imperial, he couldn't allow Vader's minion to ferret out Luke and Leia's identities. Obi-Wan, as usual, had cut through the confusion, speaking with infuriating certainty, even from beyond the grave. "Han Solo will infiltrate the station. He'll find the answers that he needs."

"Solo?" Ferus had asked in confusion. "The pilot?" They'd met briefly on Delaya, but Ferus had paid little attention. Because Delaya had also been the site of his first meeting with Luke Skywalker. Every moment they had spent together, Ferus had been wracked with doubts. Should he tell the boy the truth? Or accede to Obi-Wan's wishes, and let him chart his own course for just a little longer?

Amidst all the confusion, Han Solo had barely made an impression.

"The pilot." Obi-Wan's cryptic smile was just as infuriating in death as in life. "He's on his own now, searching. He needs direction. And he will find it on the Zoma station."

"That makes no sense," Ferus had complained. Yet he had done as Obi-Wan requested, opening himself up to the Force. Drawing in its strength and its wisdom as he groped for the way to move forward. And he felt it too. Obi-Wan was right.

This was Han's mission. He would infiltrate the satellite station in the Zoma system and find the answers they all needed to save Luke and Leia.

If he survived.

## Chapter Nine

**L**uke hunched over the controls of his T-16 skyhopper, waiting for Fixer to set off the starter flare. He missed the familiar feel of his old skyhopper, which was long gone, destroyed along with the rest of the Lars moisture farm. But this one, which he'd borrowed from Windy, would get the job done.

Luke engaged the repulsorlifts, hovering a few meters above the ground. He gave the thrusters a gentle push, tipping the T-16 slightly to its side and then upright again, just to get a feel for it. It had been a long time since he'd flown one of these. The last time he'd raced, he'd been curled into the cramped seat of a Podracer, a rickety bucket tethered to roaring engines that, without warning, could flip you up and out. Compared to that, the skyhopper was like a kiddie ride. Its central airfoil offered significant stability, and its gyrostabilizers would allow Luke to make hairpin turns and wild spins without fear of spiraling out of control.

No, winning a skyhopper race wasn't a matter of balance. It was a matter of speed—whether you could push the ion engine past its 1,200 kilometer an hour capacity. It was a matter of agility—whether you could gauge the angles and hit your marks better than your competition.



And, when it came to the Stone Needle, it was a matter of daring—whether you were willing to risk your life, just to win a race.

“Ready!” Fixer called, raising the signal flare over his head. “Set!”

Luke glanced at Jaxson out of the corner of his eye, then turned back to his own controls, letting the rest of the world fall away as he focused on the course ahead of him.

*For you, Biggs*, he thought, ready to push the thrusters to their limits.

He would risk anything to win this race.

Fixer squeezed the trigger, and the sky flashed red with the signal blast. “Go!”

Luke took off at the signal, his skyhopper shooting forward a split second before Jaxson’s. Desert streamed past, blurring into a mud of browns and grays. The small craft hummed beneath him, responding smoothly to his every shift and turn.

The walls of Beggar’s Canyon rose steeply on either side, hundreds of meters of solid sandstone that would crush him in an instant if he veered off course. Luke didn’t think about the risks. He focused on the jagged trail, the thunder of the engine, and the purpling sky overhead. He didn’t dare look back at Jaxson’s skyhopper, but he knew if he did, he’d see a cloud of dust spattering the transparisteel of Jaxson’s cockpit window. As the kilometers flew past, Luke stayed ahead, and he intended to keep it that way.

He spotted a womp rat, just a blur, streaking past beneath him, and almost smiled, remembering the days when he, Windy, and Biggs could waste a whole afternoon chasing the scraggly creatures through the canyon. During those years, all he’d wanted was to get away—from his aunt and uncle’s moisture farm, from Tatooine, from his life. Now he couldn’t remember what he’d been running from.

But maybe life was like a skyhopper race: you couldn’t look back.

## Alex Wheeler

Luke forced his mind back to the track. He rocketed through the straightaway, then whipped the T-16 sharply to the right, making it around Dead Man's Turn with only centimeters to spare between him and the canyon wall. Behind him, he heard the scream of durasteel on rock, as Jaxson's skyhopper gouged out a piece of the canyon while rounding the curve. It bought Luke a few precious seconds, and he pulled even farther ahead, reaching the Stone Needle while Jaxson was still navigating the Sandy Jaws. Luke sucked in his breath. His hands tightened on the controls. The spire stretched nearly twenty meters from the canyon floor—but from this distance, the eye of the Needle appeared only a few meters across, no wider than the skyhopper itself. Luke knew from experience that it *was* wider—but only just.

He was far enough ahead that he could win the race without threading the Needle. But that would be a coward's victory.

*Don't let 'em see you sweat, kid,* he heard Han's voice in his head, and found himself wishing that the cocky pilot was by his side.

*Of course, if he were here, he'd never let me have the controls,* Luke thought with a grin.

"You want to back out, now's the time." Jaxson's taunt came through the comlink loud and clear.

Luke didn't bother to respond. He just pushed the throttle, speeding toward the Needle. It was all about precision. Lining up the ship with the narrow opening. Coming in at exactly the right angle, at exactly the right speed. No room for error. Error meant smashing into the tower of rock at 1,200 kilometers an hour.

*Focus.*

Forget about Jaxson, about the navigational computer, about the risk of crash, the risk of death. Let the ship become an extension of himself. Let its wings become his wings, its gyrostabilizers as much a part of him as his arms and legs. Luke let the rest of the world fade away, until there were only two things left in his galaxy. The ship and the Needle.

Just a little faster, just a little farther, and—

“Blast it!” Luke shouted, as his instrument screens blazed red with alerts. Navigation failure, steering failure, engine failure...every system was going wonky. It had to be a false alarm, except—“*Blast!*” Luke cried again, as the ship bucked and shuddered beneath him. He veered sharply to the right, away from the Needle, just before its rocky jaws snapped off his central airfoil.

“Mayday!” Jaxson cried through the comlink, as his skyhopper made an erratic loop around the rocky spire. “Something’s wrong with the ship, I think it’s—” The comlink went dead, and out of the corner of his eye, Luke saw Jaxson’s skyhopper make a steep dive, dropping toward the ground at a sharp angle and an alarming speed.

And then Luke’s engine cut out. The skyhopper plunged downward. Luke pulled back hard, trying to catch an updraft. If he could glide for just a few more kilometers, he could come in shallowly enough to crash-land. Rather than just crash. But the steering wouldn’t respond. The alarms buzzed and blared as the skyhopper dropped out of the sky. Luke struggled to hold it horizontal.

*This is it*, he thought, as the ground rose up quickly. Time seemed to slow down, as it had back on Yavin 4, before the speeder exploded. But this time, it didn’t matter. Luke couldn’t just jump out; he’d modified his old T-16 for ejection capabilities, but that skyhopper was long gone. He had no choice but to go down with the ship.

The seconds dripped by, slow as melting dweezel taffy, and Luke had just enough time to admire the way the suns lit up the Stone Needle, lending the thin tower of rock a golden glow. *It looks like a lightsaber*, Luke marveled, wondering what would happen to his own, if he didn’t make it.

And then the ground finally arrived, with a long scream of durasteel on desert rock.

Time’s up.

## Alex Wheeler

There were only two pairs of electrobinoculars, so Leia had to share hers with Camie and Fixer. That was fine. She didn't have much interest in watching the race, and she certainly didn't need to see Luke thread the Needle. She'd seen him pull off more impressive stunts than that.

*And more dangerous ones*, she reminded herself, trying not to worry. She was furious at Luke for risking his life on something so stupid. After they'd come all this way to protect him. She wasn't about to encourage his foolishness by cheering him on.

But she was still curious. And every once in a while she grabbed a turn at the electrobinocs.

So she was the one peering through the lenses when Jaxson's ship dropped out of the sky, and a moment later, Luke's followed. There one minute, gone the next.

She was the one scanning the horizon for some sign of them, some movement.

She was the one who saw the ground spit up a cloud of fire.

But everyone saw the sky flare an angry red. And everyone saw the smoke.

Camie gasped. Someone put a hand on Leia's shoulder. She shook it off.

"He's fine," she said, aware that she sounded like a droid, flat and empty.

Fixer had grabbed the electrobinoculars and was peering intently at the crash site. "We've got to get out there," he said. "If they're going to have any chance at all—"

"He's *fine*," Leia insisted again.

She felt numb.

Numbly, she piled into a rusted landspeeder with Windy, Deak, and the droids. Luke's droids. Fixer and Camie rode behind them. Numbly, she took the controls and steered toward the smoke. And numbly, she finally arrived at the crash site.

Two sites, really. Two scarred holes in the ground, strewn with smoldering wreckage. Twisted pieces of durasteel, broken

shards of transparisteel. Smoke and fire. But no Jaxson. No Luke.

“Their bodies—” Fixer choked on the word. “A fire like that, it could have burned ’em up.” Windy and Deak were identically pale, identically slack-jawed.

Leia shook her head and wiped a bead of sweat from her cheek. She gazed out at the desert. The sunburnt landscape was motionless. Nothing but kilometers of empty sand. *Where are you, Luke?* she thought. *Where did you go?*

“He’s out there somewhere,” she said.

“Where would they go?” Fixer asked skeptically. “And after a crash like that, how could they—”

He didn’t finish the thought. He didn’t have to. Leia understood: *You saw the crash. You saw the explosion. How could they be in any shape to walk away?*

“He’s fine,” she said. “If...if he wasn’t, I would know.”

“How?” Fixer challenged.

*I don’t know*, she thought. But she allowed herself no doubts. Luke was alive. Somehow.

Somewhere.

## Chapter Ten

Luke opened his eyes, squinting against the bright sun. He was lying on his side, his right cheek planted against the ground. The arid, empty landscape stretched to the horizon. The Stone Needle was nowhere to be seen. Nor was his skyhopper. There was nothing in sight but sand.

He remembered the crash.

*Uncle Owen's going to kill me!* he thought ruefully.

And then he remembered everything else.

*This is not a good time for me to be piloting anything.*

Luke tried to sit up, but something was stopping him. Binders, around his wrists, around his ankles. And around his chest and knees, thick cords binding him to another person. Luke craned his neck around as far as it would go.

"Jaxson!" he hissed. "Jaxson!" Louder this time. But the body attached to him didn't move.

Something else did.

"Awake already?" snarled the massive green creature hulking over him. Luke recognized the distinctive scaled face, clawed hands, and razor sharp jaws of a Trandoshan, a race of aggressive reptilian warriors. This one was taller than average, his scaly limbs bursting from a bright orange flight suit that had clearly

been designed for a creature much smaller than him. Luke wondered what had happened to the suit's original owner. He suspected that the blast rifle slung around the Trandoshan's neck might have had something to do with it. The Trandoshan flicked his long tongue at Luke. "You've got a pretty hard head. For a human."

Luke struggled to move, but Jaxson's immobile body held him in place.

"You did something to our skyhoppers," Luke accused the Trandoshan.

Bossk widened his jaws in a smile. "The pulse generator wiped out every electrical system in a forty kilometer radius. Namely: yours."

"Why?" Luke said. "We're not your enemy. I don't even know who you are!"

"But *I* know who *you* are," the Trandoshan said. "Luke Skywalker. Friend to that galactic scourge Han Solo. And *he's* got plenty of enemies." The Trandoshan straightened up, smoothing out his flight suit. "I'm surprised none of them came to me sooner. You want a job done right, Bossk is the one to do it."

He was a bounty hunter, Luke realized. Which meant there was no point in trying to talk him out of it. Hunters were notoriously merciless and single-minded when it came to pursuing their bounty. But there was no reason Jaxson had to pay.

If he could only reach his lightsaber...

That was a useless wish. The Trandoshan, perhaps not realizing it was a weapon, had left the lightsaber where it was, hanging from a low belt around Luke's hips. But his hands and arms were bound tightly behind his back. Much as he strained, the lightsaber was out of reach.

"Who hired you?" Luke asked, hoping to learn something that would help him.

The Trandoshan offered only an icy smile. "You'll find out soon enough. Though you'll wish you hadn't."

## Alex Wheeler

“At least let my friend go,” Luke said. “He’s got nothing to do with this. He’s never even met Han.”

“This worm?” Bossk asked. “Head softer than yours, it seems. He might already be dead. And if he’s not, he will be soon.”

“He’s done nothing!”

“The Scorekeeper rewards triumph, not mercy,” Bossk said. “You expect me to sacrifice my jagganath points for your soft-headed *human*?”

Luke groaned. He’d heard all about the Trandoshans from Han, who bore a heavy grudge against the race of notorious Wookiee-hunters. Trandoshans believed they would be greeted after their death by an all-powerful Scorekeeper who would tally up the number of points they’d achieved and offer them a divine reward.

They accrued points by killing.

“Our friends will come after us,” Luke threatened him.

Bossk’s lips widened, revealing his jagged teeth. He spit out a harsh, rasping noise, his tongue flickering. The laugh of a lizard. “Your friends think you’re dead,” he said. “A few fragmentation grenades saw to that.”

“They’ll come for me,” Luke said steadily.

Bossk shrugged. “Night’s coming,” he said. “That’ll make a nice dream.” Then, without warning, his clawed foot shot out and caught Luke in the stomach, hard enough to send him and Jaxson rolling a few meters through the sand.

As the twin suns dipped beneath the horizon, Bossk dragged Luke and Jaxson into a shallow cave, then lay down across its entrance. Luke realized even the burly Trandoshan wasn’t nuts enough to travel through the Jundland Wastes at night. They would pass the dark hours in the relative safety of the cave and start out again in the morning.

Which meant Luke had until morning to figure out how to escape.



"Is he asleep?" Jaxson whispered, just as Bossk's eyes fluttered shut. His scaly arms were wrapped tight around his blast rifle. Bands strapped around each leg were packed with flare pistol cartridges.

"You're alive!" Luke whispered back, deeply relieved.

"Of course." Jaxson sounded annoyed. "So how are we getting out of here?"

They were tied back to back, lying with Luke facing Bossk, and Jaxson facing the back of the cave. "If I could just get out of these," Jaxson mumbled, straining to escape from the restraints. But after a few minutes of struggling, he gave up. "No use," he muttered. "Looks like we're lizard food."

"Maybe not," Luke whispered. He couldn't reach his lightsaber. But maybe Jaxson could. "Can you reach around to my utility belt? On the right side?"

Jaxson wriggled in the restraints, fingers stretching toward the hilt of the lightsaber. "Almost—" he said, frustrated. "Can't—got it!"

Jaxson slipped the hilt out of Luke's belt. Luke twisted his hands toward Jaxson's and fumblingly groped for the lightsaber.

"Is it some kind of knife or something?" Jaxson asked.

Luke didn't answer him. The lightsaber was back in his hands. Now he just had to figure out what to do with it.

Activating the glowing beam with his hands tied behind his back would have been risky enough. But with Jaxson tethered to him, the risk doubled. If he sliced blindly, he could easily cut off one of their limbs.

But they had no choice.

Luke had done his best with the training exercises Obi-Wan had taught him. He'd spent hours in the forest, a blindfold across his eyes, using the lightsaber to deflect sting bursts he couldn't see. And every once in a while, he felt it, that mysterious connection to the Force. Every once in a while, the Force would guide his motions, and he would strike smoothly and surely, even with his eyes closed.

## Alex Wheeler

But that was practice.

“Don’t move,” he whispered.

“What do you mean?” Jaxson sputtered. “What are you going to do?”

Luke closed his eyes. He let the Force fill him. Then, in one swift motion, he activated the lightsaber and swiped it sharply to the right.

Jaxson rolled away, the cord binding him to Luke sliced neatly in two.

Another sharp twist of the glowing blade, and Luke’s wrists were free. It took only moments to free his ankles, and then he turned to Jaxson.

Jaxson’s eyes were bulging. He shrank away as Luke came at him with the lightsaber, but allowed Luke to cut through his binders. “Where’d you get *that*?” he asked, reaching for it. Luke pulled the lightsaber out of his reach. He deactivated the Jedi weapon and slipped it back into his belt.

“Let’s just get out of here,” he whispered.

There was just one thing standing in their way. Or, more accurately, *sleeping* in their way. Bossk’s scaly body lay across the opening of the cave.

“Just slice him open with that thing,” Jaxson hissed. “He’ll never see it coming.”

Luke shook his head. He couldn’t kill the bounty hunter in his sleep, no matter what the creature had done to them.

But he also couldn’t beat the Trandoshan in a fair fight. Maybe a Jedi like Obi-Wan could have used the lightsaber to fend off a giant lizard and his blast rifle, but Luke knew he wouldn’t have a chance.

Which left them with very few options.

“*Well?*” Jaxson looked almost ready to snatch the lightsaber and do the job himself.

Luke gazed at the airspeeder anchored just outside the cave. Then looked down again at the sleeping bounty hunter. “I think I have a plan.”

Luke held his breath as Jaxson tiptoed over the slumbering Trandoshan.

Jaxson was right: it wasn't much of a plan, but it was all they had. As Jaxson crept toward the airspeeder, Luke stayed in the cave, his lightsaber activated. Its glowing blue tip hovered centimeters from Bossk's throat. If the bounty hunter was truly sleeping, Luke would wait for Jaxson to make it safely to the airspeeder, then dash after him.

But if Bossk was awake, lying in wait for his prey to make an escape attempt, then Luke would be there to stop him.

As Jaxson was halfway to the airspeeder, the Trandoshan's reptilian eye popped open. His clawed hand closed around the rifle.

"Don't," Luke said, holding his blade steady.

The bounty hunter laughed. "You think you can save yourself with a child's toy?" He swiped his arm toward the lightsaber, intending to knock it out of the way.

The blade cut cleanly through his limb. It dropped to the ground with a dull thud.

Luke stared in horror at the severed arm. Bossk didn't even flinch. He jumped to his feet, hissing with anger, and raised the blast rifle. Without thinking, Luke slashed at the rifle with his lightsaber, and the long barrel clattered to the ground. Enraged, the Trandoshan lunged for Luke. He danced out of the way, waving the lightsaber nearly at random to ward off the attack. Over Bossk's shoulder, he saw Jaxson racing back toward the cave—unarmed, yet determined to help.

"Go!" Luke shouted. "I can handle this!"

"Foolish last words, human," Bossk taunted, whipping out an archaic double-bladed sword. Luke had never seen one in person before—it looked ancient. Bossk brought the blade down over Luke's head. Instinctively, Luke raised the lightsaber to protect himself. The sword broke in half.

## Alex Wheeler

The look on Bossk's face would have been comical—if it hadn't been so terrifying.

The Trandoshan smashed a clawed fist into Luke's face. Luke went sprawling backward, but a moment later, he was on his feet again, hacking and slashing with the lightsaber. Bossk lunged for Luke, lashing out with his claws, but Luke dodged the blows. The glowing blade swept through the air, dancing around the Trandoshan. Luke wasn't thinking, wasn't aiming or strategizing, he just struck again and again, struggling and failing to land a blow. With a roar, Bossk hurtled toward him, wrapping his remaining hand around Luke's throat. Gasping for air, Luke slashed blindly with the lightsaber.

And then Bossk was on the ground. His left leg lay a meter away.

Luke gaped at his lightsaber, almost tempted to drop the deadly weapon on the ground, next to the writhing Trandoshan. It was almost like the lightsaber had taken over, fighting for itself.

And yet it had never felt so much a part of him.

"What are you waiting for, Skywalker!" Jaxson shouted, taking off toward the airspeeder. "Let's get out of here!"

Luke didn't need an invitation. He turned his back on Bossk and began to run. So he didn't see the wounded bounty hunter lob the fragmentation grenade with his one good hand. But Luke did see the deadly silver globe soar over their heads and land, with perfect aim, in the front seat of the airspeeder. "Down!" Luke shouted, grabbing Jaxson and throwing him to the ground, as the airspeeder exploded.

When the smoke cleared, Bossk was laughing. "Now we die together." He coughed, then spit out a gunky wad of viscous green blood. "Like I said—I always get the job done."

## Chapter Eleven

Han never felt quite right without his ship. The *Millennium Falcon* was docked in a shabby little hangar on Siskeen, where P'laang Ri, a Zabrak who owed Han more than a few favors, would look after it. The ship would be safe until Han returned, and the shuttle he'd borrowed was perfectly adequate. A scavenged *Zeta-class* Imperial shuttle, it was equipped with two double laser cannons and two double blaster cannons, along with a third, retractable rear-mounted double blaster cannon, just to discourage anyone who might want to follow. Not that they would need any of that, if everything went as planned, but it always helped to be prepared. Still, Han missed his ship. Right now, he especially missed the *size* of his ship.

The shuttle was large enough for two humans and a Wookiee to fit—but only if they pressed together, shoulder to shoulder. And, thanks to a burst hydraulics conduit at the beginning of their voyage, the whole cabin smelled like wet Wookiee fur. “Watch it, you dripping fuzzball!” Han complained, knocking Chewbacca’s hairy arm out of his face for the hundredth time. He brought the shuttle into range of the Zoma satellite station and flicked on the comlink. Now they would either secure permission to board the station—or get blown out of the sky.

## Alex Wheeler

Either way, at least he'd get out of this shuttle.

"This is the shuttle *Arkanoid*," Han said into the comlink. "Requesting permission to dock."

"Transmit authorization codes, *Arkanoid*," came the impersonal response.

"You sure these codes are good?" Han asked Lore, who had purchased them on the black market.

Lore raised his eyebrows. "Don't trust me?"

Han wouldn't trust Lore to deal an honest hand of sabacc or play an honest round of four-cubes, and he certainly wouldn't trust his old friend around an open till. But when it came to plundering Imperial secrets, there was no one he'd rather have at his side.

Well, almost no one.

*That's over now*, Han reminded himself sternly. Luke, Leia, and the Rebellion were in the past, and he'd closed the door on that. A cargo of glitterstim and a good chunk of the credits he'd need to repay Jabba were his future—as long as he could get aboard the station.

Han transmitted the codes. A moment later, the station's tractor beam activated, sucking the shuttle into the docking bay.

"Welcome, *Arkanoid*," the voice said. "We've been expecting you."

"Maintenance crew down that way," the stormtrooper said, waving them down a long corridor. "Dump the Wookiee at the operations station with the rest of the furbags."

Chewbacca growled. He hated to be treated like an animal. But this was all part of the plan. Han had asked around and discovered that a team of Wookiees had been shipped in from the nearest prison planet to complete labor on the shield generators. From there, Chewbacca would be in perfect position to infiltrate the station's defense and weapons systems, ensuring that, if anything went wrong, the shuttle would make an easy escape. On a remote station like this, it seemed likely that security

protocols would be lax enough to allow the Wookiee all the access he needed. Han prodded Chewbacca with his blaster. "You heard him, Wookiee. Let's go."

The stormtrooper shot him a sympathetic look. "You ask me, they may be strong, but they're not worth the trouble. Easier to wrangle a ship full of furnocs than get a good day's work out of a Wookiee."

"Tell me about it," Han said, as Chewbacca issued a long string of angry barks. Han suppressed a grin. No need to translate exactly what Chewbacca thought of this Imperial slug. Even a stormtrooper was likely smart enough to figure that one out on his own.

"Meet you in the cargo bay," Lore murmured, as Han escorted Chewbacca to the Wookiee labor unit. The Wookiee wore a thick, ill-fitting tunic that looked ridiculous but was loose enough to hide the bowcaster tucked beneath it. When the time came to leave, he'd hopefully have no trouble. "And we'll get to work."

The Imperials thought their newest maintenance team would be repairing the docking racks in the shuttle staging area.

But that wasn't exactly the kind of work Han had in mind.

Han had long ago learned that wearing a maintenance uniform was the key to getting pretty much anywhere you wanted to go. While high-profile visitors to an Imperial satellite station had to pass through any number of security checks as they wandered from one sector to another, no matter how important they were, maintenance workers quickly faded into the background. These days the Empire was doing so much construction work that most new projects were staffed by prisoners. There was little time or energy left over to guard the crews who kept the place running. No one cared what happened to the guy who fixed the plumbing or took out the trash. Which meant, thanks to their orange maintenance uniforms, no one gave Han or Avik a second look

## Alex Wheeler

at they hurried away from the docking bay toward the aft cargo hold.

It had taken a good twenty minutes on the station's nearest computer terminal to determine where the shipment of glitterstim—confiscated from a rogue transport ship and en route to a legitimate distributor in a nearby star system—was stored. Not for the first time, Han found himself missing that annoying little astromech droid, who would have been able to ferret out the information in seconds. Still, they found it and easily slipped into the empty cargo hold. It was at least a hundred square meters in area and filled with stacks and stacks of shipping containers. There were no humans inside, only a few binary loadlifters, none of whom were sentient enough to note the presence of a couple unauthorized visitors.

"So far, so good, Chewie," Han said into his comlink. "Now we just need to dig up the shipment and we'll get out of here."

Avik dropped the two large tool cases he'd been carrying on the ground and flipped them open. Both were empty. Han glanced up at the giant piles of crates lining the walls of the cargo hold. He groaned. "This could take a while."

They began searching through the stacks, prying open one crate after another. Han found several cases of Whyren's Reserve (its amber color marking it as a particularly valuable vintage), kilograms of ionite (enough to retrofit the *Falcon* and several other ships), and a month's supply of bacta. But no glitterstim. They'd been at it for about fifteen minutes when the door to the cargo hold swished open. A stormtrooper in white armor clomped into the room, looking suspiciously back and forth between Han, Lore, and their empty toolboxes.

Han clambered off the crates of fusioncutters he'd been sorting through and ambled over to the guard. His hand strayed toward his blaster, but he kept calm. It was important not to act suspicious.

"What are you two doing in here?" the stormtrooper asked. "All maintenance crews were to report to sector seven."



Han shrugged. “No one told us, buddy,” he said. “They sent us here.” He jerked a thumb at Lore, who was fiddling with some exposed wiring in the far corner. “Told us we needed to repair the, uh, gyrostabilizers in the cargo lifts,” he said, taking a wild guess at something that might need repairing.

The stormtrooper raised his comlink. “I’ll have to check on that,” he said.

“Don’t bother,” Han retorted, throwing all his weight against the stormtrooper and knocking him to the ground. The guard fumbled for his blaster, but Han knocked it out of his grasp. He reached for his own weapon. The stormtrooper lunged at Han, just as he was taking his shot. The laserfire went wild, crashing into a box of muja fruit. A geyser of bright red muja juice exploded into the hold. With a swift chopping motion, the stormtrooper smacked Han’s blaster out of his hand, then headbutted him, hard. Han shook off the ringing in his ears to deliver a solid punch to the guard’s stomach. But the white armor was impervious to the blow. “Little help here?” Han called to Lore, who was watching the fight, looking almost bemused.

“Sure,” Lore said, as Han wrestled the stormtrooper to the ground, trying to pin him down long enough to reach for one of the fallen blasters. But every time he got the upper hand, the stormtrooper struck back, with a fist to Han’s nose or an armored boot to his gut. And Lore was, inexplicably, taking his time. Out of the corner of his eye, Han saw him scoop up first the stormtrooper’s fallen blaster, then Han’s. Only then—Han darted out of the way just in time—did Lore take his shot.

The stormtrooper went limp. His helmet slipped off, and Han, as always, experienced a moment of surprise to see the human face beneath the white plastoid mask. “Took you long enough,” Han snapped at Lore. “But thanks.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” said Lore, raising his blaster.

Han didn’t have enough time to ask what he was doing.

Only enough time to think: *should have known better.*

And then Lore swung, hard.

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The weapon struck the back of Han's head.  
Lights out.

When Han woke up, he was propped against the wall of the cargo hold, his arms tied behind his back with a loop of fibra-rope. Lore was packing the final vials of glitterstim into the toolboxes. He smiled wryly at Han, without a hint of shame.

"Don't tell me this is payback for Dubrillon," Han said. He groaned at the sharp pain shooting through his head with every motion.

"Oh, please," Lore said. "This isn't personal, it's business."

"Someone trusses me up like a rong boar, I take that personally," Han warned him.

"Come on. Why split the payment in half when I can take it all? You'd have done the same thing, if I hadn't done it first."

"Never," Han said.

Lore laughed harshly. "Come on, Solo, you're the one who showed me the ropes in this game. Is it my fault you forgot the first thing you taught me?"

"Don't chew nerf steaks with your mouth open?"

"Trust no one," Lore said. "Look out for yourself, because no one else will." He grinned. "This must be a proud moment for you. The student surpasses the teacher." Moving quickly, he relieved the stormtrooper of his uniform, and then donned the armor himself. "Now, because we're old friends, you get a choice," he told Han, brandishing the stormtrooper's comlink. "I leave you for the Imperials to find...or I put you out of your misery, here and now."

"How about you untie me and we forget this whole thing ever happened?" Han suggested.

Lore didn't bother to respond.

Han ran out of patience. "Okay then, how about you take that blasted comlink and shove it in your frinking—"

"We have an intruder in the aft cargo hold, sector five," Lore said into the comlink, affecting the flat monotone of a

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stormtrooper. “Repeat. Intruder in aft cargo hold, sector five. Send reinforcements.”

Moments later an alarm sounded, and the room lit up with flashing red lights.

Lore holstered his blaster, hoisted the tool cases, and slipped through the door, offering Han a farewell salute. “Remember, nothing personal!” he shouted over his shoulder.

“Nothing personal. Right. And I’m a gundark’s uncle,” Han grumbled, as a thunder of footfalls rumbled down the hall, and a sea of white armor flooded through the open door.

It looked like the reinforcements had arrived.

## Chapter Twelve

The stormtroopers yanked him to his feet.

“This is all a big mistake,” Han said. “I’m just here to fix the cargo lifts.”

“The cargo lifts don’t need fixing,” one of the stormtroopers responded, marching him into the corridor.

“All a big misunderstanding then,” Han blustered. “No need to apologize. Just show me what needs fixing and I’ll...uh...fix it.”

This time the stormtrooper just ignored him, handing him off to two others. “Take the prisoner to interrogation,” he said. They nodded in unison. Each grabbed one of Han’s arms, and they marched him down the narrow white hallway.

Han had experienced Imperial interrogation tactics. He didn’t have too much interest in a return visit. He wriggled around in his restraints. The stormtroopers had replaced Lore’s makeshift rope cuffs with a pair of standard Imperial binders. There was no hope of escape, but if he stretched, he could *just* reach his comlink and open a channel to Chewbacca. Hopefully, Han could alert the Wookiee to the situation before he responded and gave the game away. “So, you’re taking me in for an Imperial

interrogation?” he said loudly, once he’d opened the channel. “Where is that, exactly?”

The stormtroopers ignored him. *Hope you’re listening, Chewie*, he thought. There was the possibility Chewbacca had been taken prisoner as well. But Han didn’t let himself think like that. The Wookiee was too smart.

*Of course, so am I.*

As they turned a corner, Han spotted the two things he needed for an escape: a notation marking this as corridor E-71, and a damaged bulkhead, its top half peeling away from the wall.

“See, you could use some maintenance after all,” Han said loudly, hoping that Chewbacca could hear him—and that he’d succeeded in infiltrating the station’s operating systems. Specifically, it’s electrical system. “Look at that shoddy workmanship, right here in corridor E-71. That could be dangerous,” he warned the stormtroopers. “What if you had some kind of electrical failure with your lighting system and someone just blundered into the bulkhead?” He shook his head, taking a close look around to memorize his surroundings. The remote locking device for his wrist binders was tucked into the utility belt of the stormtrooper to his left. “Nothing more inconvenient than an on-the-job injury,” he said. “You should really get that checked out. Now, while the lights are still on.”

“What are you yammering about?” the stormtrooper on his right snapped irritably.

*Come on, fuzzybrain*, Han thought. *Get the message.*

But nothing happened. He’d have to buy himself some time.

Feigning clumsiness, he tripped and stumbled to his hands and knees. The stormtroopers stopped and hauled him back to his feet. “See, this is what I’m talking about,” he said, even louder than before. “Imagine a bunch of clumsy folk bumbling around here in a *blackout*. Here in *corridor E-71*. You wouldn’t want—”

The lights went out.

Han was ready. Before the stormtroopers knew what was happening, he slung his bound hands into the first one’s head,

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knocking him into the second one. They tumbled to the floor together. By feel, Han found the locking device lodged by the stormtrooper's blaster, and then for good measure, snatched the weapon, too.

"See, fellas? This is what I'm talking about," he said, as he pried the peeling bulkhead off the wall. The stormtroopers were shooting blindly in the wrong direction, their laserfire sizzling through the dark.

"You said *right*!" Han hissed into the comlink, slithering backward through the duct until he reached the fork. This time, he took a left. Chewbacca growled into his ear. "No, if you'd said *left*, I would have gone *left*," Han snapped, inching forward again. He'd been shimmying through the ducts and conduits of the station for what seemed like hours, following Chewbacca's hastily whispered instructions. If all went according to plan, he'd eventually emerge in the shuttle docking bay, meet Chewbacca, steal a shuttle, and fly off to safety.

If he could ever find his way out of these tunnels.

This one passed right over a series of crew quarters, and the ceilings were thin enough that he could hear snatches of conversation filtering up from below. Banter about a recent game of zoneball, gossip about the latest antics of a well-known HoloVision star, even a parent yelling at his kid for shooting out a viewscreen with his junior blaster—it was almost easy to forget that this was an Imperial outpost, bent on rooting out the heart of the Rebellion and stomping it to pieces. They all seemed so normal.

And then:

"This is taking far too long!" an angry voice raged. "You know the punishment for failure."

"I have a lead," said another voice, strangely familiar. "Only a little more time and Skywalker is mine."

Though he knew the stormtroopers were tearing the station apart searching for him, and any delay could mean his life, Han froze.

One of the voices belonged to a stranger.

The other—it made no sense, but Han had no doubt—belonged to someone he knew and trusted. More to the point, someone *Luke* knew and trusted. It belonged to Tobin Elad.

X-7 couldn't avert his eyes from the screen. The Commander was terrifying in his rage. His narrow, pinched face remained palely inexpressive. But X-7 knew well the anger that roiled behind his steely eyes.

*"You think you can escape?" the Commander roars.*

*X-7, who once thought himself a man without fear, cowers in the corner. A large borrat scampers toward him and begins gnawing at the flesh of his hand. X-7 ignores it. Locked in the dark for endless days, he has become used to the borrarats.*

*"There is no escape from me," the Commander says, quiet now. Dangerous.*

*X-7 no longer knows how long he has been in the training facility. He no longer remembers how he came to be there. And he no longer knows who he once was.*

*But he knows he was someone.*

*Before they cleansed his brain, before they turned him into a machine to do their bidding, before he belonged to the Commander, he belonged to himself. He remembers that.*

*Which is why he killed the guards, scaled the walls, escaped.*

*Until the Commander's men dragged him back and threw him into the dark.*

*"You thought you'd succeeded, didn't you?" the Commander asks. He laughs. "I let you try. Wanted to see whether you'd make it."*

*X-7 is afraid to speak. He doesn't want to say anything that might make the Commander leave him alone again, in the silent dark. Any longer, and he fears he may go mad.*

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*The Commander crosses the room, strokes X-7 gently across the forehead. X-7 shivers at the touch of another human, the confirmation that he is not alone in the galaxy. "This has been very hard for you," the Commander says softly. "I know. And you have a long road still to walk, my young friend. But at the end of it, you will emerge strong. I will make you strong. You want that, don't you?"*

*X-7 nods. He wants whatever the Commander wants. Because the Commander holds the keys to the door. The Commander can let him out of the dark.*

*"You're not going to try to escape again, are you?" the Commander asks. "You've learned your lesson, haven't you?"*

*X-7 nods again. He means it. But the Commander frowns. "No, you haven't," he says. "But you will. We'll make sure that you don't want to be anywhere else than here. That you don't want to do anything else but serve me. Only that will make you happy. You'd like that, wouldn't you?" he asks. "To be happy?"*

*X-7 nods.*

*"Speak, boy," the Commander snaps.*

*"Yes," X-7 says, hesitantly, his voice dry and raspy. It has been so long since he's spoken. "I want to be happy."*

*"And only one person can make you happy," the Commander says. "Do you know who that is?"*

*"You," X-7 whispers.*

*"That's good," the Commander says. He kneels down, eye to eye with X-7. He brings his face close enough that, in the dim light filtering through the open door, X-7 can see the rage in his eyes. The Commander pulls out a vibroblade, the light glinting off its razor edge. He presses it to the soft flesh beneath X-7's jaw. "Now then," the Commander grits, bearing down. "Let's teach you how to be happy."*

X-7 recoiled from the rage in the Commander's gaze, glad that several light-years separated him from his master.

"Where is Skywalker?" the Commander asked, as he had been asking for the last several days. Each time, his voice grew quieter and tighter, as if a great force of will was needed to keep



him from climbing through the screen and throttling X-7 with his bare hands.

Not that the Commander believed in applying his own force. He preferred a more elegant style of punishment.

X-7 suppressed a shudder. "Tatooine," he said, with a certainty he didn't feel. Extensive analysis of Luke's computer records had turned up traces of a deleted communication from several weeks before. An invitation to attend a gathering of old friends on his home planet, conveniently set for this week. There was no other evidence that Luke was there—along with no evidence whatsoever that he was anywhere else. It was X-7's best lead, and it would have to do.

"This delay is unacceptable, X-7," the Commander said.

"Yes, Commander," X-7 said obediently.

"You will go there now, and you will kill him."

X-7 nodded. "Am I still to maintain my cover as Tobin Elad?"

"If possible," the Commander said. "But your first priority is Skywalker's death. If you need to reveal yourself to do so—" His face wrinkled in distaste, and X-7 knew exactly what he was thinking. X-7 had been given a mission, and he had proven himself inadequate to the task. The Commander was now easing his standards. *If you need to reveal yourself* meant *If you're so incompetent that you can't do what I wanted you to do*. X-7 would pay for that later.

He was paying for it now, with a deep, throbbing pain radiating from his chest and head, so intense it was nearly paralyzing. The Commander had taught him well, and X-7's body remembered as well as his brain. The Commander's displeasure was X-7's agony, whether they were in the same room or halfway across the galaxy from each other.

"It will be done, Commander," X-7 said.

"And then you will report to me," the Commander said.

"That's not necessary—"

"You *defy* me?" the Commander asked in a level voice, raising his eyebrow. The ghost of a smile passed across his face.

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“Never,” X-7 said.

“Then when the job is done, you will report to me,” he reported. “For further training. You seem to need a refresher.”

Further training meant further pain. Meant further hours in the dark, with the needles and the blades. It also meant returning to the only place he would ever call a home.

“Yes, sir,” X-7 said in a thin voice. “I look forward to it.”

And deep down, in a dark, hidden corner of his mind, this was true.

The stormtroopers didn’t know what hit them. They were expecting to find Han behind the bulkheads—not crashing through the ceiling of the shuttle bay, blaster blazing. He took down the two nearest stormtroopers before they had time to react. Chewbacca, storming in with two of the prisoner Wookiees on his heels, took care of the other six. Laserfire streaked across the shuttle bay, sparking and sizzling against the durasteel of the shuttle bodies. Alarms blared, but—as they’d originally planned before Lore’s betrayal—Chewbacca had disabled the poorly protected shield systems that would have prevented an unauthorized departure. All they needed to do was select a shuttle, and they were good to go.

Han picked the ugliest of the ships, a *Lambda* with scarred wings and a gaping hole in the cargo unit. Something about it reminded him of the *Falcon*. And, he rationalized, if it had endured this much damage, it must be able to really *fly*.

“Whoa there,” Han said, as the other two Wookiees tried to pile in after Chewbacca. “Where *you’re* going?”

Chewbacca growled, and gestured for the Wookiees to come inside.

“What do you *mean* they’re coming with us?” Han asked, with a pointed look at the useless cargo hold and the cramped cabin. “Does it look like we have room for strays?”

Chewbacca growled again, pointing out that the Wookiees had helped him escape and now he was returning the favor.

Then he reminded Han that if it wasn't for his help, Han would be stewing in an Imperial interrogation chamber right about now.

Han sighed. He'd always had a soft spot for Wookiees. It couldn't hurt to help a couple of them break free.

Even if it would mean spending the return journey with a mouth full of fur.

"Well, what am I supposed to do, Chewie?" Han asked, leaning back in his chair. It should have felt good to be back on the *Millennium Falcon*, but something still felt off. A strange, queasy feeling, like everything was off-balance.

*It's got nothing to do with Luke and Leia*, he told himself. Probably he was still unsettled by Lore's betrayal, and the thought that once, he might have done the same thing.

Or maybe he'd just eaten some bad meatlump.

"You expect me to power up the hyperdrive and speed off to Tatooine?" Han asked. "All because I overheard something that *may* mean Luke is in danger?"

Chewbacca's response made it clear this was *exactly* what he expected Han to do.

"You know who else is on Tatooine?" Han said. "*Jabba*. You realize that puts *my* life in danger, right?"

Chewbacca barked a dismissive reply.

"No, Jabba doesn't scare me," Han retorted hotly. "But he's got half the bounty hunters in the galaxy out looking for me—and you want me to show up on his doorstep? *Without* his payment?" Han shook his head. "Besides, don't you think it's just a little convenient that we stumbled onto exactly the information we were looking for? That of all the Imperial stations in all the galaxy we ended up on this one? A little *too* convenient, maybe?"

Chewbacca growled a final answer and, as if to make clear this was last word on the issue, turned his back on Han and began monkeying with the dented power cell housing.

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“Don’t know why you’re so sure I’ll do the right thing,” Han muttered, staring blindly at the navigation computer, trying to decide which coordinates to enter. “Not like I ever have before.”

## Chapter Thirteen

*I would know if Luke were dead, Leia kept telling herself. I would know. I would know.*

Three words, repeated over and over again, got her through each moment and the next. They meant everything to her—and nothing to anyone else. As darkness fell, Luke’s friends were ready to give up on him, but Leia insisted on staying and searching the area of the crash, seeking some clue to Luke and Jaxson’s fate.

Of course, their broken skyhoppers were a clue. The fiery shards of durasteel were clues. The scorched desert, gashes in the ground, the smoldering ruins, all clues.

But not the kind of clues Leia was looking for.

While Luke’s friends poked halfheartedly through the wreckage, already mourning the lost pilots, Leia and the two droids scoured the crash site.

Suddenly, R2-D2 beeped eagerly, twirling in circles on a patch of empty ground. C-3PO tottered over to him, then waved a golden hand at Leia. “Princess! Artoo says he’s found something!”

Leia hurried over to the droids. “What is it?”

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R2-D2 let out a long string of beeps and trills. C-3PO waved his index finger through the air. "Are you certain?" he asked the astromech. "We don't want to be too hasty—"

R2-D2 beeped indignantly.

"Of course you wouldn't be reckless at a time like this," C-3PO said. "I only meant that perhaps in your eagerness to help..."

R2-D2 cut in with a series of high-pitched, angry beeps.

"Fine," C-3PO gave in, and turned to Leia. "He says that he's picked up traces of an airspeeder, heading away from the crash site."

"Traces?" Leia looked around, seeing no telltale signs of any other vehicle. "What kind of traces?"

"Oh, patterns in the sand, trace amounts of baridium, any number of things," C-3PO said. "We droids are very sensitive to minor changes in the environment. Why, I once found a Zenji needle buried in a thirty meter high stack of—"

"Enough!" Leia snapped. "Can he track the airspeeder?"

R2-D2 beeped, then rolled a few meters toward the west. He paused, as if waiting for Leia to follow him.

"He says if we follow him, we'll find Master Luke," C-3PO said.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Leia asked Luke's friends, as she hopped into the rusted landspeeder. "Let's go!"

Fixer and the others hadn't moved.

"What is it?" Leia asked impatiently.

"Those are the Jundland Wastes out there," Fixer said finally. "You don't know how dangerous they are. We'd have to be crazy to head out there at night."

"Luke would do it for you," Leia said.

"And I'd do it for him," Fixer said, "but..."

"But what?"

No one spoke. Fixer and Windy looked awkwardly at each other. Finally, Windy cleared his throat. "But we don't know that Luke and Jaxson are even out there," he said. "You have to

admit, it doesn't make much sense. Where would an airspeeder come from out here? And why would Luke and Jaxson ride off on it?"

"That's what we're going to find out," Leia said.

"How?" Fixer asked. "By following your crazy droid?" He shook his head. "Look at this crash, Leia. I know you don't want to believe it, but—"

"They're not dead," Leia said firmly. "How many times do I have to tell you?"

"And we're supposed to trust you enough to risk our lives in the Jundland Wastes?" Fixer asked.

Leia shook her head in disgust. "Don't bother," she said. "I'll go myself. I don't need the help of a bunch of *cowards*." The droids clambered into the landspeeder, as she started the engine. "I assume you don't mind me borrowing this?"

Fixer glanced at Windy and Deak. Camie shook her head. "You can't," she told Fixer, pleading. "It's too dangerous!"

"I can't let her go out there by herself," Fixer said. He lowered his voice to a loud whisper. "And she called me a *coward*."

"I assure you, I'm quite able to take care of myself," Leia said indignantly.

"That's what you think," Fixer said. "You've never seen the Wastes." He jerked his head at Deak. "You ride back with Camie. Windy and I'll go with Leia."

"We will?" Windy asked. He looked nervously into the distance, where dark clouds billowed on the horizon, hanging heavy over the Wastes. Then he sighed. "I guess Luke'd do it for me. Let's go."

As they steered the landspeeder deeper and deeper into the desert, shadows played against the canyon walls. The unbroken stretches of sand, which had been blinding in the light of the setting sun, now faded into the night, as if the world ended in nothingness only a few meters away. The ground grew rockier,

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the landscape increasingly barren, but R2 claimed they were still on track, and so they pushed forward.

After they'd gone several kilometers, a warning light flickered on the landspeeder's instrument panel.

"The booster coils are failing," C-3PO said worriedly.

"That's it," Fixer said. "We have to turn around, head back before it shuts down completely."

"Artoo can fix it," Leia said calmly. "Can't you?"

R2-D2 beeped proudly.

"He says he can fix it," C-3PO translated, "but it could take some time."

"Just make it fast," Leia said, and slowed the landspeeder to a stop.

"We can't stop here!" Fixer yelled. "Are you nuts? The Sand People are everywhere. If they catch us..."

But Leia had already jumped out.

"Lady, you don't want to be wandering around here," Fixer said. "Not in the dark."

Leia reached into her utility belt and flicked on a small glowrod. The dim light illuminated the underbelly of the landspeeder. "It's not dark anymore," she said. "Let's get to work."

But there was little work for any of them to do, as R2-D2 fiddled with the booster coils. Moments later, a high-pitched screech rent the air. Windy's eyes bugged out. "Krayt dragon," he whispered.

Another screech, louder and closer this time. It echoed through the canyons.

"Oh dear, oh dear," C-3PO moaned, diving into the landspeeder. "Don't just stand there, Artoo, climb in," he urged the little astromech. Together, they huddled beneath a tarp of coarse eopie hide and waited for disaster to strike. Windy and Fixer looked like they wanted to hide as well.

"There might be a cave over there," Windy said, gesturing toward the desert. "We could hide out 'til morning."



"We don't have time for that," Leia said. "Luke and Jaxson are out there somewhere. Unarmed."

"*We're* unarmed," Fixer pointed out.

"You are," Leia said. "I'm not." She pulled out her blaster.

Fixer held out his hands. "How about you let me handle that?"

"I don't think so," Leia said, as a keening howl shook the night. The krayt dragon lumbered out of the shadows. Leia froze. The last krayt she'd seen was just a baby, but this was a full-grown dragon, ancient and terrifying. A cloud of dust billowed in its wake as its massive paws pounded the sand. Windy and Fixer dove for cover behind the landspeeder, but Leia didn't flinch. As the dragon charged toward her, she steeled herself and took aim. The beast's thick scales would repel her blaster shots, but Luke had once told her that krayt dragons did have one small area of vulnerability: the sinus cavity. She scrutinized the creature's face, looking for the point between its crest of horns—each one easily as big as she was—and the bony armor of its dermal face plates. If she could aim her blast correctly, the laserfire would bore straight through the cavity and into the krayt dragon's brain.

The ground shook as creature closed in. Its jaws gleamed in the moonlight. Leia had time for one shot, and one shot only. She'd have to make it count.

Leia squeezed the trigger and a bolt of laserfire blazed across the darkness, smashing into the krayt dragon's sinus cavity. Its roar of rage tore through the night. It reared up on its hind legs and threw its head back, shrieking in pain. Leia readied the blaster for another shot. But it wasn't necessary.

With a final ear-piercing scream, the krayt dragon toppled over on its side. It heaved a great shudder, and then was still.

Windy and Fixer peeked their heads out, wide-eyed. "You *killed* it!" Windy said, sounding shocked. "By yourself!"

Leia was a little shocked herself, but she did her best not to show it. Instead she just shrugged and holstered the blaster, like slaying unstoppable wild beasts was something she did every day.

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“Just a krayt dragon,” she said, trying to stop her voice from shaking.

Windy and Fixer just gaped at her. There was something new in their expressions: respect. “You sure you’re Skywalker’s first mate?” Fixer asked.

Leia nodded. “Why do you ask?”

Fixer gave her a bashful grin. “Just seems like maybe *he* should be *yours*.”

R2-D2 got the landspeeder running again and they picked up the trail without further incident. It was only a few kilometers later that they came upon the campsite, and the smoking wreckage of an airspeeder. They climbed out of the landspeeder, Leia flicking on her glowrod.

The airspeeder remains lay a few meters beyond a low-slung cave. And in the mouth of the cave: a body. Leia caught her breath for a moment, then let it out in a whoosh when she realized the body couldn’t be Luke’s. It was too large, for one thing. And as she drew closer, she could see its skin was covered in scales.

The body twitched.

Leia flinched. Then drew a step closer. Had she really seen a sign of life, or was it just a trick of the night? The creature was lying motionless, its arm and leg severed. Surely it couldn’t still be alive. What kind of monstrous beast had left him in this condition?

“This is Jaxson’s bag!” Windy shouted from behind her, holding up the tattered remains of a canvas sack. “And Luke’s electrobinocs. You were right—they survived the crash somehow. They’re alive!”

*They’re alive, and they were here*, Leia thought, slowly turning in place and gazing out at the charred, vacant landscape. *But where are they now?*

## Chapter Fourteen

Luke and Jaxson had agreed that they had the best chance of survival if they kept moving. It would be one thing if it was just a matter of making it through the night until rescuers arrived in the morning. Then they could wedge themselves into a cave and wait out the darkness. But there was no guarantee that anyone would come for them, no guarantee that they wouldn't have to spend another day and another night in the Jundland Wastes. They would have to sleep sometime, and it would be far safer to do so with the twin suns above the horizon.

It was about the only thing they could agree on.

"I told you this was the wrong way!" Jaxson hissed, as they trod through the dark and empty landscape. The glow of Luke's lightsaber led the way. "We should have gone *east*." Both had the skills to navigate by the stars. But knowing which direction you were heading didn't help without knowing where you started. And they had no idea how deep into the Wastes the bounty hunter had taken them—or in what direction home might be. Their only hope was to choose a direction and start walking, in hopes that in another few hours, or another few days, they would reach the border of civilization. They chose west, at random, knowing that choosing wrong would mean death. They had no

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food and no water, which meant a few days might be a few too many.

On the other hand, if they survived a few days in the Jundland Wastes, without getting eaten by a krayt dragon or besieged by Sand People, they would be lucky.

They would be lucky if they made it through the night.

“We just have to keep going,” Luke assured Jaxson, with more confidence than he felt.

“What do you know?” Jaxson retorted. “You don’t even live here anymore. Who are you to tell *me* what we should do?”

“You have a better idea?” Luke snapped.

There was a pause.

“Then we keep going,” Luke said.

They walked several paces in silence.

“You got a problem?” Luke finally asked.

“Yeah,” Jaxson spit out. “I’m stuck in the Jundland Wastes. In case you haven’t noticed.”

“I mean a problem with me,” Luke said.

Jaxson just grunted.

“Because if you do—”

“I don’t like traitors,” Jaxson growled.

“But I told you—”

“And I don’t like people who tell me what to think,” Jaxson added, glaring at Luke. “Especially people who think they’re better than everyone else, just because they can break orbit.”

“I don’t think I’m better than anyone,” Luke protested.

“Coulda fooled me,” Jaxson said, then quickened his pace so that Luke fell a step behind him.

*Do I really act superior?* Luke wondered. His eyes strayed to the lightsaber. Whenever he wielded it, he felt special, like there was something in him that was worthy, even powerful. He’d spent so many years feeling like a nobody, on a nothing planet—and then, to discover that he was *somebody*, a Jedi? Maybe the only Jedi left in the galaxy? He’d be crazy *not* to feel special.

But that didn't mean he thought he was better than anyone else.

Did it?

They walked briskly through the moonlit desert, trying to ignore their thirst and fatigue. The night had grown as cold as the day was hot, and Luke's fingers were growing numb. Gradually, a strange, unsettled feeling descended over him. For an instant, his senses clouded over, sheathing the world in shadow, and then the cloud dropped away, and everything was sharper, clearer than it had been before. Luke froze. He recognized that feeling.

Luke grabbed Jaxson's shoulder, gesturing for him to stop and stay silent.

Everything was thrown into sharp relief. The desert grit coating his skin, sandpapering his hands and face. The smell of the Wastes, a pungent mix of rot and death. The quietest sounds of the night screamed in his ears, separating themselves into discrete, recognizable units: the scurrying profroggs. Womp rats, feeding on a desiccated bantha corpse. And a shuffling sound.

Like footsteps, in unison, sweeping through the sand.

A muffled grunt, like the complaint of a bantha forced to carry a load heavier than it could bear.

Luke pressed himself against the wall of the nearby cliff, silently urged Jaxson to join him.

"What's wrong with you?" Jaxson hissed. "We have to keep going."

Luke shook his head.

The shuffling sound seemed to roar in his ears. How could Jaxson not hear it, not feel what was coming?

"Are you having some kind of fit, Skywalker?"

*Sand People*, Luke mouthed, then pointed over Jaxson's shoulder as the row of masked predators appeared on the horizon. Marching single file, each carrying a deadly gaffi stick and a rifle, trooping closer and closer to where Luke and Jaxson stood frozen, with no cover in sight. Jaxson's mouth formed a perfect "O" of horror. He threw himself against the wall of the

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cliff so hard it was as if he imagined he could bore through the stone with sheer will, lodging himself inside the rock until the danger had passed.

But unless the cliff magically swallowed them up, they'd be in plain sight when the gang of Tusken Raiders arrived. And, unarmed, they'd be an easy target.

*Not unarmed*, Luke thought. *I have my lightsaber.*

A lot of good it would do him against a horde of determined Sand People. Luke had heard rumors of the Tusken Raiders flaying their victims, tossing their corpses to the banthas. If he and Jaxson were here when the Sand People arrived, it wouldn't be a fight, it would be a massacre.

"We should run for it," Jaxson urged. "Now, before it's too late."

Luke shook his head. "It's wide open out there. They'll spot us, and then it's over."

"Like they're not going to spot us once they get closer, and we're just sitting here like a couple of kriffing dewbacks?"

Luke didn't say anything.

"Well?" Jaxson pushed him. "You got a better idea? Because I'm not going to just stand here and wait to die."

*You can't win*, Luke remembered Ben once saying, *but there are alternatives to fighting.*

Luke hadn't understood it then, and he wasn't sure how it could help him now. He did know *exactly* what Han would have to say on the subject: *You don't need all that Jedi mumbo jumbo, kid. What you need is a good blaster.*

Han liked to claim that Obi-Wan's Jedi advice was impractical, useless in a real emergency. Luke always argued him, but right now, he was inclined to agree. Sure, Obi-Wan had been a master when it came to the Force, but what good was that when confronted with a band of angry Sand People who—

*Of course!* Luke thought, feeling stupid for not remembering sooner. He cupped his hands around his mouth and drew in a deep breath of air. Then, eyes closed, fingers mentally crossed, he

blew out the best imitation krayt dragon call he could muster. And then he did it again, even louder.

"What are you doing?" Jaxson hissed angrily. "Now they'll come straight for us!"

"I don't think so," Luke said, nodding as the line of Sand People took a sharp turn toward the north, away from Luke and Jaxson's useless hiding place. In moments, they'd disappeared over the horizon.

Jaxson stared at him with wonder, the same expression that had crossed his face when he'd first seen Luke's lightsaber. "How'd you do that?"

"Tusken Raiders are afraid of krayt dragons," Luke said, trying not to shudder in relief that that trick had actually worked. "A dragon call is usually enough to scare them away."

"But how'd you know it would work?"

"An old friend of mine proved it to me, once," Luke said fondly. That had been the second time Obi-Wan had saved him in the Jundland Wastes. Years before, Obi-Wan had found Luke and Windy stranded in the desert, and led them to safety. The mysterious hermit had deposited Luke back at Uncle Owen's farm and disappeared into the wilderness. Luke hadn't seen him again until that afternoon Obi-Wan had saved him from the Sand People. So much had happened after that—learning that his father was a Jedi, burying his aunt and uncle, leaving Tatooine for a new life—he'd nearly forgotten.

*I wish you were here with me now, Ben,* Luke thought. The old man had lived in the Wastes for years—he must have learned a way to survive the harsh environment. But Ben was dead, and Luke was on his own.

Strangely, he didn't quite feel like it. Maybe it was because Obi-Wan had lived here for so long, or maybe it was because Obi-Wan's wisdom had, yet again, saved his life, but Luke felt the old man's presence. It was as if Obi-Wan was watching him every step of the way, urging him to go on, to survive.

*Don't worry, Ben. I won't let you down.*

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As they pushed further west, endless stretches of flat desert gave way to a ragged landscape of cliffs and canyons. Luke and Jaxson found themselves edging along steep, gravelly paths in a darkness lit only by the blue glow of Luke's lightsaber.

"Where'd you get that thing, anyway?" Jaxson asked. "You steal it?"

"It belonged to my father," Luke said, inching along the narrow trail that wrapped around the cliffside. It had dwindled to less than a meter across, and beyond it lay a gaping chasm that seemed to stretch down forever. They'd searched for a path on more solid ground, but this was the only way through—so it was either edging along the cliffside or turning back the way they'd came.

"But you never had it before," Jaxson said.

"No," Luke agreed, reluctant to reveal any more details. "I didn't."

"So who's this Han Solo guy?"

"What?" Surprised to hear the name coming out of Jaxson's mouth, Luke whirled around, nearly losing his balance. His foot skidded across the gravel, and his body listed helplessly to the side. His arms pinwheeled, frantically searching for purchase.

His hand closed over a rocky outgrowth against the side of the cliff. He grasped it gratefully, heaving himself upright. The whole thing had happened in seconds. Behind him, Jaxson hadn't even noticed the near fall.

"How do you know that name?" Luke asked, once he was confident he'd regained his balance.

"Heard you and the Trandoshan talking about it," Jaxson admitted.

"I thought you were unconscious," Luke said.

"Yeah, well..." Jaxson hesitated, concentrating on his careful footsteps. "Figured it was better to lay low, see out what was going on. So who is he? Seems like I should know, since it's his fault we're here."



*Who is Han Solo?* Luke thought. That was the question, wasn't it? Not a killer, not an assassin, not a spy—and yet someone who would run away from an accusation, rather than staying to defend himself. Not a coward—and yet someone who would refuse to join the Rebellion's fight.

"He's a friend," Luke said simply. The answer felt right.

"Some friend, getting you into a mess like this," Jaxson grumbled.

"I'm sorry you got swept up in this," Luke said.

"Yeah. I heard what you said to the bounty hunter. About letting me go," Jaxson muttered, his voice nearly too soft to hear. "Guess I should say thanks."

Luke grinned. "I never thought I'd hear you say—*abbbbbbb!*"

This time there was no warning. One moment he was walking on solid ground—the next he was in the air. As the rock gave way beneath him, he had no chance to catch his balance, no hope of grabbing hold of something solid. Time seemed to slow, but the extra moments offered him no possibility of saving himself. They merely allowed him to experience every instant of the fall. His stomach lurched into his throat, the air rushed out of him, the stars brightened overhead, sharp and crystal clear and no doubt the last thing he'd ever see. And gravity, an anchor dragging him down and down...

A rough hand closed over his, yanking him upward. Luke felt like his shoulder was tearing in two, but he didn't let go. He tipped his head back. Jaxson was lying on his stomach, arm stretched over the side of the cliff, hanging onto Luke with a sweaty grasp. His hand slipped, and Luke squeezed tighter, fearing that the grit of sand between their skin was the only thing keeping him from plunging to his death. With his other hand, he scrabbled against the soft rock, trying to pull himself up, but it was no use.

"Hang on!" Jaxson shouted, straining to pull Luke back onto the trail. With a mighty heave, he managed to yank Luke up a few centimeters, not much, but enough that Luke could grab the edge

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of the cliff with the fingertips of his other hand. "Come on," Jaxson muttered through gritted teeth, panting with the effort. Luke mustered all his strength and, muscles straining, managed to raise himself up a little higher, enough to get a good grip on the edge of the rock. As he pulled himself up as hard as he could, Jaxson gave a final tug on his left arm, and dragged Luke back to safe ground.

For several moments, they just stared at each other, as if unwilling to believe it was over. "You can let go now," Luke said finally, and Jaxson dropped his hand. "You saved my life," Luke added.

Jaxson just shrugged. "Yeah. Well. Just watch your step next time."

Luke did. There were no more near misses, and no more Tusken Raiders, nothing to break the monotony of the long, slow slog through the dark. And then, after several hours had passed, Luke became aware that he could see the shaded browns and tans of the sandstone cliffs, whereas before they had been nothing but looming shadows. The horizon lit up with a pinkish yellow glow. "We made it!" he said in wonder. "We survived until morning."

The relief died on his lips as the roar of an engine approached.

"The Trandoshan?" Jaxson gasped, looking pale. It was impossible—when they'd left, both the bounty hunter and his airspeeder had been in pieces. But who else?

"Luke!" a familiar voice shouted, as a red landspeeder came into sight. Leia leaned over the side, waving frantically. Windy was at the wheel, while Fixer and the droids waved from the back. Luke and Jaxson caught each other's eye and grinned. It was finally over.

They were safe.

## **STAR WARS: Renegade**

Deep in the desert, something moved. Something cold and reptilian and left for dead. Something else that had survived the long night.

The hunter's red eyes flickered open. His remaining hand closed into a fist, claws piercing his scaly palm. The wounds were deep, but they would heal. The arm and leg would grow back. Slowly, painfully, he would be whole again.

But it would take a long time to happen.

By the time it did, Bossk promised himself, Luke Skywalker would be dead.

## Chapter Fifteen

And then Leia just whipped out her blaster and blew that krayt dragon halfway to Coruscant!” Windy exclaimed, eyes bulging in appreciation. He gaped over Leia’s shoulder at the other denizens of the cantina, as if shocked that they hadn’t all gathered around to hear the amazing story.

Deak shook his head in disbelief. “Unbelievable. And you should have seen her at the crash site,” he added. “She was fearless. We all thought you were dead, but she never gave up hope. It was like she *knew*!”

“And how about when we thought we saw the Sand People?” Fixer added. “No fear!”

“But it *wasn’t* the Sand People,” Camie reminded him irritably. “You said it was just the wind.”

“Yeah, but if they *had* tried to attack us, Leia would’ve taken them down,” Fixer said. He slapped Luke on the back. “That’s some first mate you’ve got there,” he said. “Maybe it’s time to give her a promotion.”

Luke caught Leia’s eye, and grinned. The whole gang had ventured to Mos Eisley for a celebration of Luke and Jaxson’s survival—but the night was quickly turning into a celebration of Leia’s bravery. And Leia looked just fine with it. The princess

usually spurned flattery and wriggled uncomfortably out from under the spotlight. But this was different, she'd confided to Luke in a quiet moment. "They don't respect me for being a princess or a Senator," she'd told him. "Just..."

"For being you?" Luke had filled in when her voice trailed off. "Good. They *should*."

And it's not like Luke was being ignored. At least no one was calling Luke "Wormie" anymore, or questioning whether he was *really* a rogue hotshot pilot. They were willing enough to believe that his daring had let him do the impossible: survive a night in the Jundland Wastes.

But Luke preferred to sit back quietly and listen to his friends swap stories. It was strange, being back in Mos Eisley for the first time since he'd blasted off from Tatooine with Han and Ben. So much in his life had changed—and yet the city was the same cesspool of vice and corruption it had always been.

Fixer had been the one to suggest that they make this celebration something special, not just the same old tired game at Tosche Station. The rest of the gang had been quick to agree—all except for Luke. He told himself he was wary of the Imperial garrison in the center of town, and of the concentration of bounty hunters and other criminals under Jabba's thumb.

But the real reason: He didn't want to return to the place where he and Ben had first met Han Solo. And to remember that both of them were gone from his life now, probably forever.

He was overruled.

It had taken several hours to reach the city, and another one to make their way through crowded streets teeming with bazaars and marketplaces, pushing past moisture farmers toting their wares, grizzled spacers awaiting their next mission, aliens from every corner of the galaxy huddling in corners, exchanging secrets in hushed tones. The air was fetid with the stench of the dewbacks, eopies, jerbas, and rontos that packed the street, carrying their weary travelers from one cantina to the next.

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And there were plenty of cantinas. That was one of the things about Mos Eisley that would never change. Deak had suggested Chalmun's—but only as a joke. The spot was famous for its rowdy crowd, underground warrens of vice, and frequent blood sport. Luke decided not to mention that he'd once passed an afternoon inside, only to come very close to death by way of an angry Aqualish.

Instead, they settled on Pisquatch's Place, a snug cantina a few blocks down from Chalmun's on Outer Kerner Way. With only one room, five drink options, no live music, and a crowd filled with touchy young wannabes—aspiring pilots rubbing shoulders with aspiring criminals—the Place had only one thing in common with Chalmun's Cantina: no droids allowed.

So C-3PO and R2-D2 waited outside, while Luke fended off his friends' demands for details about how he and Jaxson had managed to survive a night in the Jundland Wastes. There was no reason to keep it a secret, but Luke—who had already told so many tales of his fake life as a space smuggler—didn't relish making the experience into another adventure story. And, although they hadn't discussed it, Jaxson seemed just as reluctant. No one knew about how Luke's lightsaber had freed them from the bounty hunter, or that Jaxson's quick reflexes had saved Luke from toppling over a cliff. But the latter wasn't something Luke would soon forget. As his friends pestered Leia, clamoring for more details of her adventures in space, Luke pulled Jaxson aside. They retreated to a quiet corner of the cantina, pausing beneath a garish painting of Noosh Feteel, one of Mos Eisley's founding fathers.

"What is it?" Jaxson asked, looking like he could guess, but was hoping to be wrong.

"I just wanted to thank you again," Luke said. "For what you did out there."

Jaxson shrugged. "Yeah, well. Whatever."

"You saved my life!" Luke said.

“Yeah.” Jaxson shifted his weight uncomfortably. “I remember.”

“I guess I owe you one,” Luke said. “And listen, what I said before, about your piloting?”

“You mean, like how I had the hand-eye coordination of a blind womp rat?” Jaxson said sourly.

Luke flushed. He didn’t remember using *exactly* those words. “Right. That. I didn’t mean it. You’re good—good enough that they should have let you into the Academy. But listen, it’s really a good thing they didn’t. Biggs—”

“You going to start up with that trash again, Skywalker?” Jaxson snarled. “Going to tell me that I’m lucky I didn’t ship out to the Academy, because then I might have ended up serving in the big, bad Imperial Navy?”

“I was just—”

“Look, maybe I was wrong about you, too, Wormie,” Jaxson admitted. “Maybe you’re not just out for yourself. Maybe you don’t think you’re better than the rest of us. But last night doesn’t change the fact that Fixer was right. Doesn’t matter who’s in charge of the galaxy, as long as the vaporators keep running.”

Luke used to think the rest of the galaxy had nothing to do with Tatooine, too. Until the day the Empire arrived and slaughtered his aunt and uncle. That was the day Luke had realized that the Empire’s reach was everywhere. But he knew he wouldn’t be able to convince Jaxson of that, or any of them. It was something they’d have to figure out for themselves. And part of Luke hoped they would never have to. Life on Tatooine was hard enough.

He held out a hand for Jaxson to shake. “Then just thank you. I owe you my life.”

Jaxson cocked an eyebrow at Luke, looking for a moment remarkably like Han. “Don’t worry about it, Wormie. You’ll pay me back some—”

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A crash of transparisteel cut off his words. Luke spotted the telltale gleam of a blaster barrel and, before he even processed what it meant, threw himself at Jaxson, knocking both of them to the ground. A searing blast of laserfire flew through the air where their heads had been, striking the ugly painting behind them. A jagged hole exploded in the Mos Eisley forefather's forehead.

The creature in the doorway held the blaster in his right hand and as he stepped fully into the cantina it became clear that his left arm ended at his shoulder in a cauterized stump. His scaled face was bruised and dented, and one red eye clouded over with green blood. He lurched through the door on one leg, and swung the blaster across the cantina, spraying laserfire in every direction.

Bossk was back.



## Chapter Sixteen

**H**ey—he’s supposed to be dead!” Luke protested, as he overturned a table and pulled down Leia behind it for cover.

“I guess no one told him,” Leia said, her blaster already in hand. She peeked her head out and took a couple shots. Laserfire erupted all around them, and she lowered her head again, safely shielded behind the table. Luke spotted Jaxson, Windy, and Fixer cowering beneath another table a few meters away. None of them were armed.

“Jaxson!” Luke shouted. When Jaxson turned, Luke tossed him his blaster.

“What are you doing?” Leia asked.

“I have my lightsaber,” Luke said. “That’ll be enough.”

He raised his eyes above the edge of the table, just enough to scope out the situation. Bossk, who had attached the sawed-off barrel of a blast rifle to the charred stump of his left leg, was framed in the doorway, his own blast rifle peppering the cantina with laserfire. His two allies, the Gamorreans who had blasted through the windows, stood in opposite corners of the cantina, firing at anything that moved.

But this was Tatooine, which meant plenty of the cantina patrons were ready and willing to fire back. Every time Bossk

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and the Gamorreans tried to advance, they were pinned down by a barrage of laserfire. So they stayed at the perimeter, deflecting shots with chairs and tables, pinning down everyone who lay inside. It was a “Mos Eisley” standoff.

The room was thick with smoke. A foul stench of scorched plastoid hung heavy in the air. Shards of sunlight filtered into the dark room through shattered transparisteel, lighting up the pale, terrified faces of the unarmed cowering behind furniture.

A hammerheaded Ithorian leapt up from behind the long bar, emitting a keening wail as he raced toward the exit. He made it ten steps before blasterfire cut him down, and he dropped to the ground in a twitching, moaning heap.

Luke tightened his grip on his lightsaber. *Enough.* The bounty hunter was here for *him*, and he wasn’t about to hide under a table while innocent people were hurt.

“If you and Jaxson can take out the Gamorreans, I can handle Bossk,” Luke told Leia. She gaped at him.

“You don’t even have a real weapon!” she protested.

“Just trust me,” Luke said. “We have to end this now.”

Leia glanced over her shoulder at the nearest Gamorrean. “He’s not covering his right flank,” she said. “I think I can take him down, if I can make it over in that direction. And if Jaxson can get the other one.”

Luke caught Jaxson’s eye, and jerked his head toward the Gamorrean at the far end of the saloon, who held a heavy blaster in one hand and a disrupter rifle in the other. Every few seconds he fired off a warning shot. When he got bored of that, he played target practice with the row of bottles lining the bar, exploding them one by one. If Jaxson could make it to the edge of the room, and sidle along the wall unseen, he’d have the perfect angle for a direct hit. Jaxson followed Luke’s gaze, then gave him a confident nod.

On *my signal*, Luke mouthed, and, nodding again, Jaxson began to inch into position.

"You sure you know what you're doing?" Leia whispered. Luke nodded. She squeezed his shoulder, then slipped away.

"Bossk!" Luke shouted, hoping to draw attention away from his friends as they lined up their shot. "It's me you want! Leave these people alone."

"The coward speaks," Bossk said, then aimed a round of laserfire at Luke's head. Luke ducked below the table again. Once Leia and Jaxson took out the other two shooters, it would be easy to dispatch Bossk. But Luke didn't want him dead. Not until he found out who'd hired the bounty hunter. "Surrender yourself, and we can end this."

"How about you surrender *yourself*," Luke suggested, trying his best to channel Han's confidence. "Unless you want to lose the *other* leg."

The bounty hunter chuckled. "You plan to take on a Trandoshan and two Gamorreans?"

"I'm not worried about the two Gamorreans," Luke said—and, simultaneously, Leia and Jaxson took their shots. The snout-nosed aliens fell in unison, with a single, resounding thud. Luke leapt to his feet. "Leave the Trandoshan!" he shouted to the cantina. "He's mine."

Bossk chuckled again, although this time his laughter sounded hollow. He pulled the trigger on his blast rifle, sending a blast of laserfire directly at Luke's chest. Without hesitating, Luke blocked it with his lightsaber. The laserfire ricocheted off the glowing blue blade, and Luke advanced toward the bounty hunter.

*It's just like I practiced,* Luke told himself, as Bossk blasted away at him. Luke whirled the lightsaber through the air, deflecting shots one after the other.

*Focus,* he thought.

*Concentrate.*

*Let the Force guide you.*

This time it wasn't just Obi-Wan's voice that he heard. It was as if Obi-Wan himself was present, guiding Luke's hand. The

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lightsaber zigzagged with a smooth surety and grace that Luke had never before achieved, even in his best training sessions. The glowing blade shimmered and sparked as the blasts pinged off of it and, step by step, Luke advanced on the Trandoshan. The cantina had fallen silent, every eye on Luke and his dancing blade. Finally, Luke was close enough to slash the blaster out of the Trandoshan's had.

Close enough to make good on his promise to take the Trandoshan's other leg—if he wanted to. Which he didn't. The thought of such a brutal act, even in self-defense, made him sick. But he had to hope that Bossk believed he was capable of it.

The Trandoshan reached for the BlasTech pistol tucked into his belt. But Luke stopped him with a flick of the lightsaber. "You're stronger than me," he said quietly. "You may even be faster than me. But you've seen what this weapon can do." He touched it to the Trandoshan's armored breastplate. "This can slice through your armor in an instant. You may be able to survive without an arm or a leg, but can you survive without a heart?"

"I will not beg for mercy," the Trandoshan said coldly. "Slay me if you must. The Scorekeeper will embrace me with honor for my many kills." Luke knew he believed it. Bossk didn't fear death. He feared cowardice, humiliation, and dishonor. The crueler punishment would be to let him live.

"Who are you working for?" Luke asked.

Bossk's jaws drew back in a jagged smile. "There's only one creature on this dung heap of a rock who's worthy of my services. One creature who owns you all."

*Jabba.* Of course.

"Then go back to your employer, and you tell him it doesn't matter how many bounty hunters he sends after me. I'll *never* help him get Han."

"You would die to protect that spacer scum?" Bossk asked.

"No one's dying today," Luke said. But if it came to that? Yes. And Luke knew that Han would do the same for him. No

matter what had happened, Luke was sure of it. “So while you’re at it, you can give Jabba another message: You want Luke Skywalker? Better come and get him yourself. If you *dare*.”

Luke knew his message would never get back to Jabba. The Trandoshan would probably hop the first freighter off the planet, rather than face Jabba’s wrath at having failed. Or he would try again, round up another handful of incompetent Gamorreans for another attempt on Luke’s life. But—Luke watched the Trandoshan hobble away—he doubted it. And even if the bounty hunter decided to try again, by that time, Luke would be long gone. He was done hiding out; and he was done pretending that this was a place where he still belonged.

It was time to go home.

## Chapter Seventeen

X-7 peered through the scope of his A280 longarm blaster rifle, watching Luke and his friends dodge blasterfire. His hand tightened on the front-grip pump as he readied for the shot. From his perch on the roof of an out-of-business water distribution plant across the street, he had a perfect view of the chaos inside the cantina. Tatooine's blazing suns blanketed him with a brutal heat that radiated in waves off the bleached pourstone of the roof. Sand coated his hands, his face, the insides of his nose and mouth. It was as if the desert was consuming him. This place was the armpit of the galaxy, and the sooner he got out, the better. But he couldn't go anywhere until Skywalker was taken care of.

He waited impatiently for the Trandoshan to deal Luke a death blow. But it never came. And X-7 found himself relieved. Which made no sense. It shouldn't have mattered whether Luke died by X-7's hand or the bounty hunter's claw. All that should have mattered was that the target ended up dead, and the Commander was satisfied. Fulfilling the mission, that was to be his only job, his only care.

But this time, X-7 wanted more than that. He *wanted* the kill. Luke had defied him one too many times, clinging to life; Luke

had made the Commander doubt X-7's competence. Luke Skywalker needed to die, and X-7 needed to be the one to make that happen.

X-7 knew something was wrong. He wasn't supposed to feel *want*. Just as he wasn't supposed to feel frustration, or impatience as he watched the battle play out, his finger itching on the trigger of his blaster. These were emotions—and emotions were dangerous. More than that, they were forbidden.

X-7 also knew that he should report his problem to the Commander, who would be further convinced it was time for more training. More time in the box, pinned to the wall, pincers prying through his thoughts and memories, cleaning him out. Or perhaps the Commander would decide he wasn't worth the trouble and terminate him. This shouldn't have mattered, either. Life was nothing to X-7, nothing but a way to serve the Commander. If he could better serve the Commander through death, so be it.

But nothing was the way it was supposed to be, not since Luke. The longer he spent on this mission, the more he wanted to complete it. And the more he *wanted* other things, whether or not he was supposed to. Things like Luke's death.

Things like his own life.

*Everything will get back to normal*, he told himself. *Once Skywalker is dead.*

The wounded Trandoshan limped out of the bar. X-7 had no idea why the bounty hunter would have given up before he or his target was dead. But it wasn't important. It was X-7's turn now. Luke was standing behind the shattered window, jagged transparisteel framing his trusting face.

Kneeling, X-7 rested the barrel of the blaster on the edge of the roof, and framed Luke's head in the targeting scope. He lined up the perfect shot. His finger tightened on the trigger, but he hesitated. Just to savor what was to come. Just a moment—but a moment too long.

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The blast nozzle jabbed hard into the back of his head. X-7 likely would have been able to identify it by feel—a DL-44 heavy blaster—but he didn’t have to. He knew exactly what kind of blaster it was, because it was accompanied by a familiar voice.

“Drop it.” Han didn’t wait for X-7 to comply. He kicked the weapon out of X-7’s hands. It toppled off the roof, crashing into a Jawa trading post below and clanging against an unsuspecting R2 unit. The unit beeped and sparked, skidding wildly toward a tethered copie. The spooked beast reared up on its hind legs, slamming back to the ground squarely atop a stall of fresh pallie and pika fruits. A clutch of angry Jawas and fruit vendors gaped up at the roof, shouting in squeaky voices and shaking their fists.

“Get up,” Han ordered. “Slowly.”

As he climbed to his feet, X-7 did some quick calculating. He could kill Solo now—the smuggler’s blaster was nothing against X-7’s speed and K’tara fighting skills. But he couldn’t do it now, not with half of Mos Eisley watching from below. His orders had been to remain undercover for as long as possible, to kill Luke without losing the Rebellion’s trust. Which meant he would have to let this play out as long as he could, and try to turn it to his advantage.

“Better shoot me now, Solo,” X-7 growled. “At least if you want to live past sundown.” No point in denying what he really was, not when he’d been caught in the act.

Han shook his head. “You’re no good to me dead,” he said. “Not until we make it good and clear to *our* friends what you’ve been up to. You want to quit breathing after that? Be my guest.”

X-7 laughed. “You came all the way here to clear your name? How...*cute*. Too bad it’ll never happen.”

Han just scowled at him, and raised his comlink. “Chewie, how’s it coming down there?”

The Wookiee barked in response, and Han nodded sharply. “Well, hurry it up.” He kept the blaster steadily aimed at X-7. “*Our* friends will be here soon.”



X-7 smirked. “Just in time to rescue their good and loyal friend Tobin Elad from the diabolical Han Solo.”

“They’re going to find out exactly what their *good and loyal friend* is made of,” Han snarled.

“And you’ve brought evidence, have you?”

Han said nothing.

X-7 arched an eyebrow. “Your word against mine, then?” he said. “The word of a man who stashed several kilograms of detonite in his quarters? Who fled justice, rather than face his accusers? The man so scurrilous that even Jabba the Hutt has deemed him untrustworthy? I’m sure *our* friends will have no trouble believing a man like that.”

X-7 could read people; it was the only way he’d stayed alive for so long. So when Han lowered his eyes and said, quietly but firmly, “*I’m* sure,” X-7 knew.

He wasn’t.

“But where’s Han?” Luke asked, yet again, as Chewbacca led them through the Mos Eisley crowds. “And what are you doing on Tatooine? What’s going on?”

Chewbacca just issued the same terse bark he had every time Luke asked.

“He says, ‘You’ll see,’” C-3PO translated, sounding rather displeased. They threaded their way through a cluster of chattering Jawas, standing in the midst of a pile of spare parts and smashed pika fruits and shaking their fists at the sky. “Listen to me, you Wookiee—”

Chewbacca cut him off with a warning growl.

“I’m merely suggesting that if you were to offer us some additional information about what you and Captain Solo are doing on the planet, we might be in a better position to help,” C-3PO huffed.

The Wookiee ignored him, disappearing into an empty water distribution plant and beckoning them to follow. He hurried to a dark, crumbling stairwell and rushed up the steps, two at a time.

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R2-D2 beeped.

“What do you *mean* we can trust him?” C-3PO asked. “Do you know how many times he’s threatened to tear my arms off?”

R2-D2 beeped again.

“*Yet?*” C-3PO yelped. “He hasn’t done it *yet?* Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

Luke and Leia brushed past the droids. They were wasting time. “Come on,” he urged them. “Something’s going on. Let’s see what it is.”

Luke followed Chewbacca all the way up the roof. And when he stepped out of the stairwell, he stopped so abruptly that Leia nearly slammed into him. “What is it?” she hissed.

Luke didn’t respond. He just grinned.

“Good to see you’re still in one piece, kid,” Han said. Then he inclined his head toward Leia. “Greetings, Your Worshipfulness.”

Leia’s eyes widened. “Han! I can’t—what are you doing up on the...?”

But she swallowed her words as Han stepped aside and revealed the figure kneeling by the edge of the roof, Han’s blaster digging into the side of his head.

“Elad!” Luke exclaimed. “What’s going on?”

“What’s going on is that you owe me another one, kid,” Han grimaced down at Elad. “Everything he’s told you is a lie. He’s not here to help you—he’s here to kill you.”

Luke shook his head. Tobin Elad had become a good friend. He’d listened when Luke needed to talk. He’d believed in Luke when Luke hadn’t had the strength to believe in himself. “The explosion on Yavin 4?” he asked quietly. “You’re saying...”

“He’s a spy,” Han said. “Working for the Empire.”

“How do you know?” Leia asked.

Han raised his eyebrows. “What if I told you I just knew?” he asked. “What if I told you to trust me?”

Elad turned his face toward Luke and Leia for the first time. “Don’t listen to him,” he said, in a firm, steady voice. There was

no trace of fear in his eyes. “*He’s* the Imperial spy. He came here to kill you, Luke. It’s why I’m here—to stop him.”

Han jabbed Elad with the blaster. “Shut up.”

“Or what?” Elad asked. “You’ll kill me in cold blood? That will only prove the truth: that you’re a mercenary. For enough money you’ll do anything. Even kill an innocent man. Or—” He glanced meaningfully at Luke. “Someone foolish enough to believe he’s your friend. If I have to die to reveal who you really are? So be it.”

“You’re not listening to this junk, are you?” Han asked. “You barely know this guy. Don’t know anything about him. And you’re going to believe him over me?”

“And what do they know about you?” Elad countered. “Other than the fact that you’re a smuggler, a criminal, and wanted in twenty different star systems. Go on,” he urged Leia. “Ask if he has any evidence. Ask if he has a shred of proof that *I* would ever be a threat to the Rebellion.”

Leia didn’t even hesitate. “He doesn’t need any.”

Han started in surprise. “I don’t?”

“He doesn’t?” X-7 said, his surprise shocking even himself.

“No,” Luke answered for her. “He doesn’t.”

The certainty that filled him had nothing to do with the Force. He didn’t need the Force to tell him that he could trust Han. The pilot had proven his loyalty, and his friendship, again and again—and no matter what had happened on Yavin 4, that was unquestionable. Luke had come to Tatooine hoping to take comfort in the friendships of his past, people he’d known long enough and well enough that their loyalty could never be questioned.

But coming home had made him realize that he wasn’t the same naïve moisture farmer he’d been when he left. He wasn’t the same Luke Skywalker who’d hunted womp rats with Windy and matched daredevil skyhopper maneuvers against Fixer and Jaxson. They’d known him longer, but they didn’t know him better. Not anymore.

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Luke had only known Leia and Han for a short time, but they were more than friends, they were family. And he trusted them both with his life.

He gazed steadily at the man who'd called himself Tobin Elad. "If Han says you're a threat, then you're a threat. All I need is his word."

Han broke into a surprised grin. "Then I guess you won't be wanting this?" he said, and tossed a datacard in Luke's direction. Luke snatched it out of the air and looked at it in confusion.

"Holograving of the spy getting orders from his boss," Han explained. "Ask most people, and they'd tell you my word isn't worth two credits."

Elad looked disgusted. "You're all fools," he snapped. "And it's going to be my pleasure to kill you."

"Not today," Luke said, amazed by the transformation. In seconds, Elad had become a stranger—his voice, his posture, even his *face* seemed different. Harder. Crueler.

"No," Elad said. "But soon." And then, with lightning speed, he slashed an arm out, slamming into Han's windpipe. As Han gasped and lurched forward, Elad sprang to his feet and leapt off the edge of the roof.

Luke rushed forward in time to see Elad's falling body reverse motion in midair and rocket toward the sky. Smoky plumes billowed from his hidden jetpack as he sailed over the roofs of Mos Eisley.

"Can't believe I let him get away," Han muttered angrily as soon as he could breathe.

"Don't worry." Luke watched Elad's figure dwindle to a speck, disappearing on the horizon. "He'll be back."

## Chapter Eighteen

So, why'd you come back?" Leia said coolly, once enough time had passed that it was clear the escaped assassin wasn't returning. "Finally get bored playing your little space games?"

"Games?" Han repeated in disbelief. "*Games?* I risk my *neck* to come back here and save your lives—even after you accused me of trying to blow up Luke—and *that's* the thanks I get? Maybe I should have just stayed away."

"Maybe you should have," Leia snapped. "Then you wouldn't have to explain why you ran away in the first place."

"Listen, sweetheart, no one said anything about running away." Han jabbed his finger in the air toward her. "For all you know, I only busted out of there so I could find out who was after Luke."

Chewbacca interrupted with a nagging bark. Han waved him off.

"See, now you've hurt Chewie's feelings," he said. No need to translate what the Wookiee had *actually* said. "That's some thank you."

Luke cleared his throat. "Thank you, Han."

"*You're* welcome, kid," Han said, shooting a glare at Leia to make sure she knew she wasn't included in the sentiment.

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"I still don't get how you knew Elad was a spy," Luke said. "Or how you knew we were here. Or—"

Han waved away the questions. "Long story."

Chewbacca let loose a long stream of growls and barks.

"What's he saying?" Leia asked.

Han shook his head. "Don't mind him; the fuzzball here's just hungry. Gets a little testy when he misses dinner."

C-3PO cleared his throat. "If you'll pardon me, Princess, the Wookiee has explained that Captain Solo located the truth at grave risk to his own life!"

Leia quirked her lips into a half smile. "Is that true, Captain Solo?"

"It might be."

"Then I offer you my sincerest gratitude on behalf of the Rebellion," she said formally.

Han gave her a deep mock bow. "On behalf of myself, I accept."

"And Han—" The icy distance was gone from her voice, along with any trace of mockery. "Thank you. Han...I'm sorry about before. On Yavin 4. That should never have happened. We should have trusted you."

Han shrugged, as if it didn't matter. "You did what you had to do, Princess. Just like the rest of us."

Luke shook his head. "But we knew all along that you never would have—"

Leia put a hand on his shoulder to stop him. "No. It was my call—it was my investigation. And..." She steeled herself again. "I'm just glad you came back. The Rebellion needs you."

"Well, if the *Rebellion* needs me," Han said, giving her a knowing grin. You *need me, too, Your Worshipfulness*, he thought. *And one day you're going to admit it.* "I guess I'll stick around a little longer. Give you plenty of time to make it up to me." He cast a sharp glance over the roof, where the fruit vendors had righted their stands and the Jawas had gotten back to work, peddling half-defective droids and bartering with locals for their credits. A

couple of them were still staring up at the roof, looking far too interested in what they saw there. “How about if you do the rest of your groveling back on the *Falcon*—Jabba’s going to hear I’m back in town, sooner or later. And by the time he does, I plan to be halfway across the galaxy.”

“Not that you’d ever *run away*,” Luke teased.

“Hey, kid, there’s running away, and then there’s *being smart*. You want to stay alive much longer? You’ll figure out the difference.”

“I think I’m beginning to understand,” Luke grinned at his friend. “But before we go, let’s attend the services for Biggs—that’s why we came, right?”

Feeling as good as they had since the award ceremony following the destruction of the Death Star, Luke, Solo, Leia, Chewbacca, and the droids left the roof and melded into the crowds of Mos Eisley. They headed toward a cemetery in the desert where they would make it just in time to pay their last respects to Luke’s childhood friend and a hero of the Rebellion.

“Another chance?” Jabba the Hutt reclined in his throne, gulping down a live, wriggling gorg coated in spicy mubasa sauce. “HO! HO! HO!” His massive body shook with each burst of gurgling laughter. “You want another chance to fail me?”

The Trandoshan bounty hunter strained in the grip of the Gamorrean guards who held him in place, still angry about the wasted deaths of their brothers-in-arms. Struggling was useless; the guards held him with a durasteel grip. “The human was setting a trap for you,” Bossk told Jabba. “He *wanted* to be captured. You should be thanking me.”

“HO! HO! You saved me from a *human*?” Jabba laughed again, and the rest of his court hastily joined him. “Then why did you try to sneak off-planet in the middle of the night like a Baldavian pocket hare? Why not come to me and claim your reward?”

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"I will get Skywalker for you," Bossk hissed. "And Solo. And"—he pounded a clawed fist against his armored chest—"the *Wookiee*. They're mine."

"They're *mine*," Jabba roared. Alarmed by the sound, the Kowakian monkey-lizard who played court jester plunged his head into a nearby vat of boga noga. "Just like everything else on this planet," Jabba added. "Perhaps you need a reminder of that."

Bossk shook his head.

"What do you think?" Jabba asked the room. It erupted into hooting cheers. A storm of voices whirled around them, but one word became clear, chorused over and over again. *Rancor*.

Jabba nodded. "Step forward for your *reward*, bounty hunter."

The Trandoshan stayed rooted to the floor until the Gamorreans pushed him forward.

"Have no fear, bounty hunter," Jabba said. "I'm not going to kill you."

As Bossk released a nearly imperceptible sigh in relief, Jabba depressed a button on his pipe. "But *he* might," Jabba said, chuckling, as a trapdoor opened beneath the bounty hunter and he dropped to his fate. The rancor hadn't eaten for some days, and it howled in delight at the appearance of a new meal. If Bossk was as tough a warrior as he claimed to be, he would survive.

If not...Jabba smiled and dropped another squealing gorg into his maw. If not, no matter. There were plenty of other bounty hunters. Better bounty hunters, who would have no trouble dispensing with human scum like Luke Skywalker or Han Solo. Bounty hunters who would drag Solo to Tatooine and deposit him at Jabba's feet, so he could suffer the fate he deserved.

Torture. Humiliation.

And ultimately, death.

Yes, if Bossk couldn't handle it, there was someone else who could.



## **STAR WARS: Renegade**

Solo had survived long enough; it was time to get the job done. And Jabba had exactly the man to do it. He glowered at his second-in-command. “Get me Boba Fett.”









***Firefight***  
BY ALEX WHEELER





## Chapter One

Ten points of light shot through the midnight black, streaking toward the ground like falling stars.

*Make a wish.*

It was a woman's voice, soft and kind, fluttering up from a dark, buried place in his mind. Another man might have taken it as a long-forgotten voice from a long-forgotten past.

But X-7 had no past.

And these were no stars.

He shook off the imagined voice, the echo of an echo of a memory. Long ago, in the beginning, he'd heard voices like this, closed his eyes and seen strangely familiar faces smiling down on him, breathed in a hint of fresh spiceloaf or the rich scent of overripe blumfruits floating on a warm breeze and felt that other life, that *human* life, nearly close enough to touch. There had been a time when he'd held tight to these memories that weren't memories, this evidence that he'd once been someone else. That he'd once been *someone*.

But that had been before. He'd learned. His Commander had taught him. Memories were wrong; the past was dead. He wasn't someone; he was no one, and that was right. That was good. The Commander had relieved him of the burdens of the past, the

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pangs of memory, the frailties of emotion and human need. X-7 had only one need: to obey his Commander, and that, too, was right.

That was good.

Except he had failed. Luke Skywalker lived, though the Commander wanted him dead.

And now X-7 had failed again.

“Return to base for retraining,” his master had commanded. But X-7 had disobeyed. X-7, who lived to serve, who had no life, no purpose, no will beyond the desires of his Commander, had defied the call, had fled to this lifeless moon on the fringes of the galaxy, had made a new plan.

It was not disobedience, he told himself. It was not a fear of the retraining, with its long needles and neuronics whips and dark cells and pain. It was Skywalker. X-7 couldn’t return to his master in failure and shame, not while Skywalker still breathed. X-7 never killed for fun or in rage; he killed only for his Commander. But there was something about the young Rebel, something that made X-7 boil. X-7 couldn’t—*wouldn’t*—return to his master until the mission was complete and Skywalker was dead.

It was the right thing. It was the good thing.

But then why were the voices of the past returning to haunt him? Why was the dead hollow inside him slowly filling with anger, with the need to see Skywalker dead?

The Commander was right; X-7 knew that. Some-thing inside him was wrong. There were impurities that needed to be scrubbed away. Erased. X-7 had tried to ignore that, and now he was being punished. *I will go back. I will obey*, he promised himself. *As soon as Skywalker is dead.*

“Targets incoming,” the perimeter alert system informed him. X-7 shook off his doubts. The time had come. Ten lights blipped across the target scope. Through the moon base’s transparisteel roof, he watched the ships approach. Ten of the galaxy’s most skilled, most determined, most ruthless pilots, all



eager to carry out his wishes. He had taken his time composing the team, but the frustrating wait was nearly over. They had come to Iope, the third moon of Rinn, with the promise of a mysterious job and rewards beyond their wildest dreams if they accomplished the mission. Pilots like these didn't ask questions; they just chased the payoff.

Some of them, the worthy ones, might even receive it.

"I'll meet your ships at the landing site," he said to them, transmitting a set of coordinates. "Good luck." He shut down the comm before they could ask why they would need luck. They wouldn't. Only skill. The ones who had enough of it would have their answer soon. As for the ones who lacked it...they'd have their answer even sooner.

He activated the laser-cannon targeting computer and zeroed in on the ten points of light. "Welcome to Iope," he said.

Then he fired.

"Blast it!" Slis Tieceer Dualli swung his CloakShape fighter hard to starboard. His insectoid compound eyes took in every inch of the battlefield at once while the eye on the back of his head scanned the radar screens erected behind him. A bolt of laserfire blazed past his cockpit, too close for comfort. He couldn't believe that the kriffing mudcrutch was *firing* at him!

In his twenty-year career as a mercenary, Dualli had met his fair share of galactic scum. But it never failed to enrage him. He took their money, yes. He flew their missions. Smuggled their goods. Assassinated their enemies. And he waited. Waited for them to step over the line, to cross him one too many times, to make a mistake that couldn't be forgiven. Dualli was the best pilot in the Outer Rim; everyone knew that. And he was the best Kobok pilot in the galaxy. But few were bold enough to hire him.

Probably because half of his employers ended up corpses.

Dualli wasn't picky about his jobs. So when the mysterious human had lured him with the promise of a rich reward, he'd come eagerly. But he had also come prepared.

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He increased power to the deflector shields and armed a concussion missile. One direct hit would be enough to destroy his traitorous employer's base. And Dualli's modified launchers carried six missiles each. He could probably go a good ways toward destroying the moon itself. Either way, the human who'd made the mistake of firing on him would soon be in pieces. He just needed to approach close enough for a clear shot.

In their original form, CloakShapes were known for their sluggish maneuvering abilities. But no one who knew anything about flying would be caught dead in an original CloakShape. Dualli's had been modified with a rear-mounted maneuvering fin and a turbocharged ion engine. They'd rescued him from plenty of tight spots—far tighter than this.

The Kobok eased the ship into a shallow descent. A barrage of laserfire rained down on him, scorching the hull. Red light flickered on his monitor as the power generator caught a glancing blow. Whoever this human was, he was good. Too bad for him Dualli was better.

The attacks intensified as Dualli neared the surface. His hands dancing across the control panel, he guided the ship through the hail of laser bolts. The dull, pitted plain of the moon came into view, a transparisteel-domed base rising at the edge of a long ravine. "Got you," Dualli muttered.

The alert system screamed as a missile hurtled straight toward the CloakShape. Dualli veered away from the surface, nearly crashing into a Preybird flying just overhead. "Blast you!" Dualli screamed into the comm. "Get out of my flight path!" He yanked his controls to the left, and the ship peeled off hard to port, narrowly avoiding a collision—and taking him straight into the line of fire. A laser bolt sizzled into the ship's underbelly. The ship shuddered, and a moment later, the hyperdrive monitor shorted out. The shot had cooked his drive generator, which meant he was stuck in this blasted system until he could fix it—or acquire another ship.

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Dualli fixed his glare on the clumsy Preybird. Once he'd taken care of his traitorous employer, the incompetent pilot would be next.

The near miss might have made another pilot more careful; it only made Dualli more impatient. He took the ship into a steep dive and sharply leveled out at one thousand meters. He increased power to his thrusters and adjusted his targeting computer. The base loomed in his scope. Then Dualli opened a comlink to the surface. He wanted the human to know that he was about to die—and that Dualli would be responsible.

He would have preferred creeping up behind the enemy and jabbing a venomous claw into his neck. But payback from a distance would have to do. “This is Slis Tieeer Dualli,” he announced. “Say good-bye, because this is your last moment to live.”

The answer came back in Dualli's native tongue. “*Chstbiss*, Slis Tieeer Dualli.” *Good-bye*.

Light blazed from the surface of the planet, two clicks from the base Dualli had targeted. It took Dualli only a few seconds to process the situation and reorient his targeting computer. But a few seconds was one too many. The surface-to-air proton torpedo slammed the CloakShape fighter's deflector shield generator.

The shields went down completely, laying Dualli bare to the enemy attack. He flicked a spindly yellow arm toward the escape-pod activation switch, but nothing happened. Total system malfunction—the CloakShape was dying.

Laserfire strafed the ship. Dualli glimpsed orange flickers with his third eye as flames licked at the cockpit.

“*Chstbiss*,” Dualli had time to whisper as another torpedo screamed toward him.

The CloakShape exploded.

The *Leilana's Dagger* bounced and shuddered in the rain of debris from the exploding CloakShape fighter. Jayn threw power to the

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front deflectors, praying that the ion-flux stabilizers would keep him from spinning out of control. A chunk of the CloakShape spiraled into the distance, disappearing in the black. *I could be next*, Jayn thought, trying to keep his hands from shaking. It wasn't like him to get rattled on the job, even in an ambush. But this time was different.

*Just one last job.* That was what he'd told himself. For years Leilana had begged him to settle planetside, live a nice quiet life with her. A *safe* life. He'd put her off, again and again. *Next year*, he'd told her. *Next job.* But now Leilana was gone.

He'd missed his chance to do the right thing by Leilana. One last job, one last payment, and he'd have enough to move them to Laressa, Phindar's capital city, where they could have the life they deserved. But the job wasn't exactly working out as he'd planned.

Two of the other ships had already peeled out of orbit and winked into hyperdrive. Jayn decided to follow them. He could do without the credits. He would find a way to make things work in Laressa. He could find a nice, boring job ferrying rich guys to and from their rich homes. He could do anything if he could just maneuver out of here. He plotted a course out of orbit, zigzagging through space to avoid the laserfire. Debris pummeled the shields, but the freighter could take it. As long as—

"No!" Jayn shouted as a burst of laserfire took out his port ion engine. He increased power to the thrusters, but a plume of flame shot from his main drive nozzles. The ship vibrated beneath him, as if it were about to fly apart. He tried to pull up, to avoid an incoming blast, but the controls were nonresponsive. A torpedo blasted the reinforced hull. He heard an alarming metallic scream, and moments later a sizable chunk of his starboard wing floated past his cockpit. The *Leilana's Dagger* began to drift.

"No," Jayn said again, slamming a fist into his useless control panel. "No. No. No!"

## STAR WARS: Firefight

The engines were toast. And according to the monitors, fires raged throughout the ship, causing multiple systems failures. Weapons. Navigation. Deflector shields. He was dead in the air. Laserfire pounded the defenseless ship. Acrid smoke billowed into the cockpit. *I'm sorry*, he thought, choking in the thick, foul air.

*Don't be sorry.* It was Leilana's voice. *At least now we can be together.*

He smiled. As the storm of fire consumed him, he searched for her face in the flames. But there was only light and pain.

And then darkness.

Div pulled his ship into a steep dive, dodging the whirling storm of flak. Laserfire streaked past the cockpit. He veered starboard, angling the ship away from the barrage of fire, but took a glancing hit on his port wing. The deflector shields were taking a beating. Another hit and he'd be cooked.

*Then it's simple*, Div thought coolly. *I won't let it happen again.*

Three of the other ships had exploded before his eyes. Two more had fled. If the job had paid any less, perhaps Div would have followed them. But he needed the credits—and he was more than a little interested in meeting the man who'd set him up.

So he steered calmly through the laserfire and debris, letting his instincts take over. The ship dipped and rolled, spun and corkscrewed, tracing an intricate path of steep dives and hairpin turns. Nothing could touch him.

His ship was hot off the assembly line, one of the first of KSE's revamped Firespray line. It had been a serious indulgence, but it had been worth it. With its rotating twin blaster cannons and rotating cockpit, it was easily the most graceful and powerful ship he'd ever flown. After only two months, it was like an extension of his own body, and he had no doubts that he could land it safely.

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*Now!* he thought suddenly, and without questioning the impulse, he pulled up into a steep ascent—as another stream of laserfire sizzled through the space he'd just occupied.

Div smiled. *You want to kill me, you'll have to try a little harder*, he thought.

The domed transparisteel base was the obvious target. Too obvious. And the pilot of the CloakShape had fallen for it. Div didn't intend to suffer the same fate.

The laserfire explosions bursting from the surface were clearly traceable to the base, even with the naked eye. To open fire from an undisguised and undefended surface base? It reeked of incompetence. And Div's gut told him that his would-be employer was far from incompetent.

He keyed a new command into his computer, instructing it to triangulate the beams of laserfire, tracing them back to their point of origin. The calculations would have been difficult even if he were sitting still; speeding through space, navigating with wild gyrations to avoid the flak and fire, made them nearly impossible. But the near impossible was Div's specialty, and soon his suspicions were confirmed. The fire coming from the base was just a cover. The computer's triangulation directed him to an apparently empty spot two clicks from the moon base. A preliminary recon sweep indicated nothing but a rocky embankment. As Div drew the ship dangerously close to the surface, however, it became clear that the rocks were camouflaging a primary weapons embankment.

The moon had no atmosphere, which meant no cloud cover to fog Div's view of the ground. Soon he'd drawn near enough to spot the laser cannons. Dodging and weaving through the streaking fire, he shut down his targeting computer. It could do the job, but sometimes Div preferred handling things himself. He liked the feel of the targeting controls in his hands, liked letting his instincts take over and guide him toward a sure hit. Liked, most of all, that moment of *knowing*, when the target was in position and he could fire.

## STAR WARS: Firefight

He took his time lining up the shots. It was as if a calm eye had opened up in the storm of laserfire, letting him aim in peace. But the calm was only an illusion. Div was still dancing between the beams, avoiding debris and sliding back and forth through crisscrossing webs of light. He moved as if the world had slowed to a crawl for him, as if the evasive maneuvers were beneath his notice. He saved his focus, his energy, for the shot.

He lined up the first laser cannon with his sights.

Fired.

Direct hit.

The laser cannon embankment exploded.

Div squeezed the trigger a second time, then a third. And in an instant, the cannons were silenced, the skies clear. Smoke mushroomed from the ground. As it dissipated, a small figure emerged. Div was still too high up to make out any features, but he imagined that the man was gazing directly at him.

The ground parted, revealing a wide manufactured cavern beneath the moon's surface. An underground hangar.

Now that it was safe, the other four ships came in for a landing. Div waited until they were all on the ground before joining them. Their employer had gathered the best pilots in the galaxy, but now they would all know that Div was the best of the best. The one to whom they owed their lives.

The moment his ship touched down in the hangar, Div grabbed his blaster. He hadn't made it through one ambush only to walk unarmed into another. But when he exited the ship, the other four pilots were assembled in a line, no weapons in sight. Two were humanoid males, one human and one Sorrowian, both grizzled and wearing identical hostile grimaces. The third was a Chistori, with beady black eyes and jagged teeth gnashing in his long, narrow snout. While the other pilots, like Div, draped themselves in simple, loose-fitting fabrics for easy maneuvering, the Chistori was in full body armor. It likely contained a temperature-control system, Div decided. Chistori were cold-

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blooded; without accommodation, drastic temperature changes could be deadly for them.

The final pilot, a human woman with short, spiky black hair and tattoos inked across her face, barely acknowledged his presence. Her eyes were riveted on the fifth figure, unmistakably the man in charge. He stood off to the side and appraised them all with an icy stare. As Div joined them, the man began to clap, a humorless smile on his face. “Nice work,” he said, nodding toward the destroyed laser cannons.

Div aimed his blaster. “You want to tell me why you just tried to blow me out of the sky?”

The man’s smile widened. It was a gruesome mockery of human emotion. “Merely a test to separate the quinto wheat from the chaff. I’m investing a significant amount of money into this mission. I had to ensure I’d chosen correctly. I assume you’re still interested in my job offer?”

Div holstered the weapon. He had no doubt that he had sharper reflexes than anyone there. If things went sour, he could protect himself. And he had the “significant amount of money” to consider. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

The man handed each of the pilots a datapad. “Gentlemen and lady, your target is a man named Luke Skywalker. He works with the Rebellion—”

Div’s hand inched toward his blaster. “This is an *Imperial* job?”

The man shook his head. “Strictly freelance,” he said. “The Empire may have its reasons for wanting Skywalker dead; I wouldn’t know. I have my own.”

Div could usually tell when people were lying, but this man defied his instincts. His face was a blank, free of the almost imperceptible tells—tightened muscles, dilating pupils, twitching eyelids—that gave most liars away. Div chose to believe him. For now.

“You want him dead so bad, why not kill him yourself?” Div asked.



The man stiffened. “Because I choose to hire you to do it,” he said tightly. “I suggest that be your last question.”

The other pilots glared at Div. Div glared back.

“The Rebels have a tight security net around Skywalker,” the man continued. “When he’s on the ground, he’s usually untouchable, which is why you’re all here. Skywalker fancies himself a hotshot pilot. I’m wagering that at least one of you is better.” He nodded at their datapads. “All the information you need is in there, including details of his upcoming mission and intercept coordinates. You’ll operate as a team and split the money evenly. Payment only if and when Skywalker dies.”

The Sorrusian threw his datapad to the ground. “*Team?* I work alone,” he snarled. “I don’t need anyone’s help to take down a *human*. And I can prove it.” He reached for his blaster—and dropped to the ground before his fingers could even graze the holster. A thin trail of smoke wafted up from the neat hole through his forehead.

Their employer held his blaster casually, almost carelessly, as if it were a toy. Div couldn’t help being impressed. Speed, accuracy, and ruthless efficiency: It was a formidable combination.

“Anyone else have any concerns they’d like to raise?” the man asked.

The remaining pilots shook their heads, exchanging wary glances. Div spoke. “Say we work as a team. Who’s in charge?”

Their employer glanced toward the rubble of the laser cannons. “You don’t seem like the kind of man to avoid the obvious,” he said, then turned back to the other pilots. “Grish B’reen,” he said flatly, nodding as the Chistori straightened up. “Fallon Pollo,” he said, and the grizzled man gave him a sarcastic salute. “Clea Sook.” The woman met his gaze without flinching.

He clapped Div on the shoulder. “Pilots, meet Lune Divinian. Your new leader.”

## Chapter Two

Yavin 4 to Skywalker, Yavin 4 to Skywalker. Come in, Skywalker.” There was a long silence. “Hello? Anyone home, kid?” Han Solo teased, rapping his knuckles gently against Luke’s head.

Luke jumped, finally noticing Han’s presence. He’d been sitting on the floor with his eyes closed for the past hour; he wondered how long Han had been watching.

Han grinned. “Taking your naps sitting up now?”

“Not exactly.” Luke flushed. He’d been trying to meditate, to open himself up to the power of the Force. It was something he’d seen Obi-Wan Kenobi do. Inaction could sometimes be as powerful as action, old Ben had explained. Unfortunately, he’d never explained exactly what that meant. So Luke had sat down, closed his eyes, and waited for the Force to give him some answers. *Where can I find X-7? Why is he trying to kill me? How could I have been so dumb as to believe he was my friend?*

But the Force had been silent. He might as well have taken a nap.

“What is this, then?” Han asked. “More of your Jedi mumbo jumbo?”

“It’s not mumbo—oh, forget it.” He wasn’t embarrassed to be caught exploring his Jedi skills—even if it had turned out to be a total failure. But none of Luke’s friends realized just how desperate he was to track down X-7, and he wanted to keep it that way. Everyone was eager to find the assassin, of course. As long as he was alive, Luke was in danger. But for Luke, it was more than that. He was angry. The man who’d called himself Tobin Elad, the man who’d revealed himself to be an Imperial assassin, had pretended to be a friend. He’d weaseled his way into Luke’s life and trust, and Luke couldn’t forget it.

Nor could he forgive.

But the trail had gone cold, and the Force was no help—which meant Luke had to wait for X-7 to come to him. Something told Luke it was bound to happen. Soon.

“Commander Narra wants us in Base One,” Han said. “But if you want me to tell him you’re too tired...”

“Let’s go,” Luke said, eager for the distraction.

When they arrived at the looming Great Temple that served as the Rebel base station, Wedge Antilles, Zev Senesca, and Chewbacca were already waiting in the briefing room. Commander Arhul Narra nodded as Luke and Han took their seats at the table. “Good, we can begin,” he said brusquely. His protocol droid, K-3PO, activated an overhead screen. It lit with the image of a planet, inky storm clouds swirling in the planet’s atmosphere.

“This is Kamino,” Narra said as images of churning seas and weeping skies flickered across the screen. In the distance, Luke could make out shadowy stilt cities shrouded by fog. “It’s on the edges of Wild Space, but unlike most of the planets out there, Kamino is valued by the Empire. Its scientists played a crucial role in the Emperor’s rise to power.”

“Sure, they made the clones,” Zev said. “Why the history lesson, boss? Even the Empire finally figured out that natural borns make better fighters.”

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Narra looked out over the faces of the pilots, all too young to have served in the Clone Wars. “I fought side by side with those...*things*,” he said, “before Palpatine turned them against the Republic. Those Kaminoan scientists created a living, breathing, deadly weapon that nearly destroyed us all. And now we have reports that they may have created another.”

Jumbled fuzzy images of a laboratory appeared on the screen. “For several months, we’ve been aware of a secret Imperial research base on Kamino. The scientists were said to be developing some kind of superweapon. We’ve tried to infiltrate the lab, with no success. But one month ago, with no warning or explanation, the base was abandoned by the Empire.” He gestured toward K-3PO, who deactivated the screen. “You’ll access the base, gather any information you can about the weapons developed there—and, of course, scavenge any equipment or artillery that might be useful to the Rebellion. I’ve uploaded the mission details to your datapads. You leave tonight.”

“Oh, do we?” Han said. “That’s it? You’re not even going to say please?”

“Han!” Luke chided him. Commander Narra was the leader of Red Squadron and Renegade Flight. Luke was no longer as intimidated by him as he used to be, but something about the man still commanded respect. He’d been a warrior for nearly his entire life and had single-handedly rebuilt Red Squadron after it had almost been demolished in the Battle of Yavin.

“It’s all right,” Narra said. “As I was about to say, we’re down several members of the squadron at the moment. Captain Solo and Chewbacca, if you could contribute your services in their stead, the Rebel Alliance would be grateful.”

“Well, the *Millennium Falcon*’s got a busted acceleration compensator, so it’s not like I’m going anywhere anytime soon. And since you asked so *nice*ly...” Han shot Luke a smug grin. Then he slapped his hands on the table and rose to his feet. “I’m all yours.”

C-3PO tottered in nervous circles around his astromech counterpart, R2-D2, ensuring that everything was in working order. “You take care of Master Luke, now,” he instructed the little droid sternly. “And don’t do anything foolish.” C-3PO would be traveling with Leia on a diplomatic mission to Mon Calamari while R2-D2 headed to Kamino with Luke.

R2-D2 beeped indignantly. He was doing a last-minute check of Luke’s X-wing, tweaking the calibration on the flashback suppressor.

“Because I know you,” C-3PO pointed out. “And you’re always taking silly risks.”

R2-D2 whirred and whistled.

“*Me?*” C-3PO slapped his bronzium hand to his chest. “Of course *I’ll* be careful. *I’m* always careful.”

“Come on, Artoo,” Luke said, joining the droids. Han and Leia trailed him. “We should go.”

“Master Luke, I don’t like the sound of this mission,” C-3PO informed him. “Surely the Empire had a good reason for abandoning that base.”

“I’m sure they did, Threepio,” Luke agreed. “And we’re going to find out what it is.”

R2-D2 beeped eagerly.

“See?” Luke said. “Artoo thinks the mission sounds like a great idea.”

“Oh, of course he does,” C-3PO said in disgust. He flicked a hand at R2-D2. “Go, then. Just make sure you come back in one piece.”

Leia rested a comforting hand on C-3PO. “Artoo will be just fine,” she assured him. “Don’t worry.”

“I would never do such a thing, Your Highness,” C-3PO said. “I have absolute faith in Master Luke.” But when Luke and R2-D2 turned to ready the X-wing, he followed them nervously, already jabbering more useless warnings and advice.

Han burst into laughter. “Crazy bucket of bolts.”

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"He's worried about his friend," Leia said, irritated. Han could turn anything into a joke. "I think it's sweet."

"Oh yeah?" Han raised his eyebrows. "And how about you, Princess?"

"How about me what?" But she knew what.

"Pretty dangerous mission I'm heading out on," Han said. "You want to give me any last-minute warnings? Beg me to come back in one piece? Tell me not to go?"

"*Dangerous?*" Leia forced a laugh. It wasn't that she wished Luke and Han weren't going on the mission. The Rebellion needed them. She just wished she were going with them. Just in case. The meeting on Mon Calamari was crucial to maintaining the stability of the Alliance; she knew that. But she couldn't shake the feeling that she belonged on the other side of the galaxy, with Han and Luke. "The base has been abandoned. This mission's about as dangerous as a game of sabacc."

"Then lucky thing you're not going," Han shot back. At Leia's look of confusion, he explained himself. "Because you're terrible at bluffing, Highness."

She rolled her eyes, determined to admit nothing.

"No need to be embarrassed," he said. "It's only natural. You put a little space between you and something that matters to you, of course you're going to think about worst-case scenarios. In fact..." He shifted his gaze to the ground, as if afraid to meet her eyes. "You'll be gone all week on Mon Calamari, right?"

"That's the plan," Leia said, surprised. Was Han about to admit that he worried about *her* safety? She smiled. It was just like him, teasing her about her feelings when really he was just embarrassed about having any of his own. "Is something bothering you?"

He rubbed his temples, visibly agitated. "I just don't like it, that's all."

"Yes?" Leia prompted him, suppressing a smile. "Don't like what?"

"Leaving behind...my ship."

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“Your ship?” Leia echoed, incredulous. “Your *ship*?”

“Sure. Chewie’s coming with me, and you’re not even going to be around to keep an eye on her, and it just doesn’t feel right, leaving her behind all alone like this.”

“Right,” Leia said in a flat voice. “You’ll worry about *her* while you’re gone. Of course.”

“What?” Han asked, finally picking up on her anger.

“Nothing,” Leia said. “Absolutely nothing. Just...” She shook her head and waved an arm toward the *Millennium Falcon*. “Go,” she told him. “I’m heading out soon. So why don’t you go say good-bye to your precious *ship*.”

He shrugged, then started to walk away. “Oh, and by the way, Your Worshipfulness...” He paused, his back still to Leia. “Try not to get yourself killed out there.”

Leia sighed. “You, too, Han.” But she said it too quietly for him to hear.

## Chapter Three

Approaching Kamino orbit,” Han said into the comm. “You copy, Luke—uh, I mean, Red Leader?”

“Copy that.” Luke’s response came in just as the other four X-wings winked out of hyperspace, back into normal space.

An enormous gray globe loomed before them, its atmosphere roiling with storm clouds. There were no Star Destroyers circling the planet, nothing at all to indicate an Imperial presence. But Han still felt something dark and dangerous emanating from the planet. Maybe it was the thought of all those Kamino assembly lines churning out stormtroopers like a nerf-sausage factory. Or maybe it was just the thought of all that rain. Han hated rain.

He rubbed his shoulder blades and did his best to straighten up in the cramped cockpit. These X-wings maneuvered well, no doubt about that. But they were no replacement for the *Millennium Falcon*. For one thing, what good was a ship without a decent-sized hold where you could enjoy a game of dejarik and a bottle of lum? Still, it could be worse, Han reminded himself. He could be a Wookiee.

“You still with us, pal?” he asked on a private comlink to Chewbacca. “Enjoying your luxury liner?”



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The Wookiee growled angrily in return. Han laughed, remembering how ridiculous Chewie had looked hunched up in his X-wing, fur matted against the cockpit windows. X-wings, like most everything else built to human scale, just weren't made for Wookiees.

A light began flashing on the main screen of Han's X-wing. "Luke, my ship's picking up some strange gravitational readings," he reported.

"Copy that," Luke replied. "Wedge and Zev reported them, too."

"Probably just a natural fluctuation in the gravitational field," Han said. "I've seen this kind of thing before. Nothing to worry about."

Luke paused. "I don't know," he said. "I have a bad feeling about this."

Han rolled his eyes. Luke and his bad feelings....He knew that Luke thought it was the "Force" giving him some kind of warning. The kid refused to accept that everyone had *feelings*. Sometimes it was instinct; sometimes it was luck. Sometimes it was just a bad batch of won-won. Anything but a mystical, invisible galactic *Force* imparting wisdom from beyond.

"There's a clear path to the surface," Han said. "We go in now, we can be on the ground in—"

"Hold on," Luke said. "I want to investigate these gravitational readings. Something's not right."

Han shook his head. The kid was being overcautious. "It's not necessary, Luke. I told you—"

"*Red Two*, hold your course until further notice," Luke said, with special emphasis on the call sign. "Red Leader out."

"What was Narra thinking, putting Luke in control of this mission?" Han mumbled on his private line to Chewie. Not that Luke wasn't an amazing pilot; he'd proven that he was. But the kid was green.

Chewbacca shot back a short burst of barks and woofs.

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"Fine, so I don't like taking orders from *anyone*," Han admitted. "The only person who *can* tell me what to do is—"

Chewbacca interrupted with an alarmed bark.

"The *Empire*?" Han repeated, incredulous. "Since when do I let the Empire tell me what to do?"

Chewbacca barked again, and then Han's radar screen lit up with lights.

"Incoming!" Wedge Antilles shouted through the comm unit.

"Who are these guys?" Zev asked as a motley collection of ships appeared before them. Han spotted a couple of freighters, a Preybird, and what looked like a Firespray. "They don't look Imperial."

A blast of laserfire shot from the cannons of the Firespray, straight for Luke's ship. He banked sharply to port just in time.

"They don't look friendly, whoever they are!" Han shouted, increasing power to his front deflectors and accelerating toward the nearest freighter. "I say we take them out...unless you have different orders, *Red Leader*?"

"Your orders are not to get toasted, Red Two," Luke said. "And that goes for all of you, Red Squadron. Let's show these guys they're making a *big* mistake!"

Han unfolded the wings of his ship and locked S-foils in attack position. The rest of the squadron did the same, gearing up for battle.

"Stay on my wing, Chewie," Han said into the comm, taking off after the nearest ship. He adjusted his targeting computer, waiting for the Preybird to edge into the center of the scope. Then he squeezed the trigger, launching a missile at the enemy ship. "Take that—*whoa!*"

The Preybird shot an antiballistic countermeasure from its tail launcher. It collided with the missile, unleashing an enormous explosion. Han pulled up hard, nearly sucked into the fireball. The nose of the X-wing glowed white with heat. And the Preybird was already looping around, closing in on Han for a kill shot.

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Suddenly, a shower of laserfire raked across its hull. Han glanced up to see Chewbacca's X-wing streaking past. The Wookiee had bought him a few seconds, just enough time to shake the Preybird and regroup.

Five X-wings, four enemy ships: the math was simple—*should* have been simple. Just as the battle should have been over in minutes. But these guys were good. Almost too good.

Han half rolled the X-wing and spun it into a descending half loop, reversing direction and speeding after the two freighters on Luke's tail. Their flight paths crisscrossed back and forth, trapping Luke between them. Evading one put him in firing range of the other. They'd caught him in a web, and it was tightening around him.

Han dived into the center of the formation, hurtling toward one of the freighters. It held to its flight path until the last moment and peeled away just before a collision—passing so close that Han caught a glimpse of the pilot's lizard-like snout.

"Thanks for the assist, Red Two," Luke said into the comm.

"Anytime," Han shot back. "Like...right about now!" He fired off two blasts at the Preybird, zooming in from four o'clock, laser cannons blazing.

Han couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right about this attack. He couldn't put his finger on it, but something was *off* about the way these pilots were targeting them. If he could just take a moment to *think*....

"Red Two, bird on your tail, six o'clock!" Wedge shouted into the comm.

Han dropped altitude abruptly. Laser bolts screamed overhead. Fire strafed his wings. The Preybird was back. Han accelerated, forcing all power to his thrusters, then whipped the ship around and spiraled through a series of gut-churning turns. The Preybird clung to him every step of the way. A burst of fire streaked toward him. Han jerked the ship to the side, forgetting for one fatal moment that this wasn't the *Falcon*, with its

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temperamental thrusters. He overcompensated, shooting hard to starboard, directly into the firing path of the Firespray.

The laser bolt scored a direct hit on the aft engine. Flames sparked from Han's control panel, and smoke filled the cockpit.

The Firespray closed in for the kill.

Luke slammed the Firespray with a barrage of laserfire. The ship seemed, incredibly, to dance between the bolts, emerging unscathed. But at least it backed off of Han.

"Han, what's your status?" Luke asked, watching anxiously as smoke poured from his friend's X-wing.

There was no answer.

"Han!" Luke shouted, beginning to panic. "*Report!*"

There was another long silence. Then: "Mild damage to aft engine, but it's under control. Thanks for the save, Red Leader."

Luke breathed a thin sigh of relief.

This wasn't working. The enemy might have been outnumbered, but it wasn't stopping them from putting up a fight. This mission was too important to abandon—but Luke refused to lose a member of his squad to this faceless enemy. They needed a new plan—quickly.

*He* needed a new plan. After all, Commander Narra had put him in charge.

*I don't know why*, he thought, dispirited.

But it didn't matter if Narra had made a mistake. Luke was in charge, which meant it was his responsibility to guide his men down to the surface. To keep them alive.

"Red Three, Red Four, hold present course," he ordered finally. "Red Two, Red Five, you're with me." The enemy pilots were too formidable as a unit. But divide and conquer—that could work. Wedge and Zev would stay in a high orbit while Luke, Han, and Chewbacca would head for the planet. The enemy would be forced to split up. Three on two was a greater advantage than five on four. And once Luke and the others had

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dispatched their attackers, they could return to help Wedge and Zev clean up the rest.

It was the perfect plan—except for one thing. As Luke, Han, and Chewbacca dived toward Kamino, the enemy ships *didn't* split up. They stuck close to Luke's trail. Too close.

The Preybird opened fire, followed by the Firespray. And their blasts were concentrated on Luke.

"Reverse course!" he shouted as Kamino loomed in his viewscreen and all four enemy ships strafed him with laserfire. Han and Chewbacca were trying to hold them off, but the three of them were outnumbered. Luke pulled up hard on his controls, attempting to gain altitude and return to Wedge and Zev. But the thrusters wouldn't respond.

It didn't make sense. "Artoo!" he shouted, banking sharply to avoid a blast of fire. He could force the ship into a pitch and roll, but the thrusters weren't giving him any lift. Once the enemy figured out he couldn't shift direction, he'd be toast. "What's going on with the navigational thrusters? Have we been hit?"

R2-D2 beeped something that indicated a negative. He swiveled his domed head and extended a manipulator arm, searching for broken connections. Luke blasted laserfire at the nearest freighter. His targeting and weapons systems were still operational. But the ship was accelerating toward the planet—and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

*The strange gravitational readings!* Luke suddenly realized. They hadn't been caused by a natural anomaly after all. Some kind of tractor beam had to be dragging his ship toward the planet. "This is Red Leader!" he cried into the comm, panicking. "Retreat! Repeat: Retreat. Something's pulling me toward the planet. All units retreat while there's still time!"

"Time's up, kid," Han said into his comm. "Whatever it is, it's caught me, too." His X-wing went flying past Luke's, with Chewie's close behind. The enemy ships were falling, too. The blasts of laserfire broke off as the pilots tried desperately to pull their ships out of the tractor field.

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But nothing Luke did seemed to help. R2-D2 had no luck, either. They were falling, with no way to slow the descent. “If we come in too steep, we’ll burn up in the atmosphere!” Luke said, alarmed. But they could only wait—and hope. If he made it through the atmosphere intact, he could eject. If not...

“At least Leia’s not here,” Luke murmured. “That’s something.”

The deep black of space gave way to the swirling storm clouds of Kamino. The wind screamed past as Luke’s X-wing hurtled toward the surface. Wide, flat platforms raised on stilts stretched over a dark, churning sea. The ship would either slam into one of the city platforms and break into a million pieces, or it would drop into the waves and disappear forever. Luke didn’t plan to stick around to find out which. He scrounged behind his seat for his survival kit and stuffed it into his utility pouch. It was now or never.

“You ready, little guy?” he asked R2-D2.

The astromech droid beeped encouragingly. Luke took a deep breath—and ejected.

## Chapter Four

The wind roared in his ears, a deafening thunder. His stomach lurched into his throat. The ground sped toward him; the icy air sliced his face, stole his breath, burned his eyes. Then the parachute deployed.

And all was calm; all was silent.

Luke floated, the wind now nothing but a gentle breeze. The city gradually grew beneath him, spindly gray buildings sprouting from the water, connected by wide, flat platforms. Beyond them, nothing but open sea. In the distance, ships screamed through the sky and crashed into the waves, one after another. *Han and Chewie must have ejected, too*, Luke thought, watching their X-wings disappear beneath the sea. *They had to.*

He was able to angle his descent enough to aim for one of the platforms, but at the last minute, a gust of wind blew him off course. The parachute wrapped itself around a long, thin antenna shooting up from the surface. Luke stopped with a jolt as the parachute lines were stretched taut. He found himself dangling upside down, about twenty meters off the ground. Rain pelted his face. Bolts of lightning flashed overhead, dangerously close. It suddenly occurred to him: What if this wasn't an antenna?

What if it was a lightning rod?

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Trying not to panic, Luke yanked on the cords holding him to the parachute. He hauled himself upright. *If I can cut myself free, I can climb down the antenna*, he told himself.

As long as he didn't lose his grip.

As long as the wet durasteel surface wasn't so slick he slid to his death.

And as long as he wasn't struck by lightning on the way down.

He had to swing close enough to the antenna to grab hold. He dangled from the ropes, shifting his weight in one direction, then the other. At first he just swayed gently, but soon he was swinging like a pendulum. He slammed into the antenna and wrapped his arms around the wet durasteel. It was so cold that he could already feel his fingers going numb. He'd have to do this fast. Wrapping his legs tightly around the narrow pole, he activated his lightsaber. The glowing blue blade sliced through the parachute cords. Luke was free. Now he just needed to find a way down.

He peered at the ground, which seemed extremely far away. There were no handholds on the antenna, and the material was too slippery to risk climbing hand over hand. Instead, he shinnied down, finding purchase with his feet, then lowering his weight, inch by slippery inch. His hair was plastered to his face and rain streamed into his eyes, turning the world into a watery blur. His hands slipped down the pole with a blistering squeal, and he dropped the last three meters, landing on the ground with a heavy, jolting thud.

But at least he'd made it onto the planet. Now, the next problem: How was he ever going to leave it—especially with his ship at the bottom of the Kamino sea?

The city, a collection of dark domed buildings rising on stilts from the choppy waters, was absolutely still. According to Luke's mission briefing, the place was little more than barracks for the families of those working in the research station, so it made sense that much of the population would have left when the station



had closed down. He'd been expecting a sparse population, a certain emptiness, but he hadn't expected...*this*.

The platforms were empty. Motionless. And yet signs of life were everywhere. Speeders sat in the middle of the street, apparently abandoned, rusting in the rain. Peering through water-streaked windows, Luke glimpsed homes with tables set for dining, offices with work-cluttered desks, children's playrooms strewn with toys. It was as if one day all the residents had simultaneously dropped what they were doing and walked away.

Or disappeared.

There was a rustling noise behind him. Luke froze. He rested his hand on his blaster and slowly turned around.

R2-D2 beeped in delight. Luke relaxed and smiled in relief. "Glad you made it, little guy. Now we just have to find the others." He pulled out his survival pack. It was equipped with a homing beacon and a signal detector that would allow him to track the beacons of the other X-wing pilots. Two blinking lights popped up on the screen—one for Han, one for Chewbacca. They were close—less than a kilometer away. The signal tracker would show him exactly where to find his friends. But it couldn't tell him whether they were still alive.

Div turned his back on his ship before it sank completely beneath the water. No point in dwelling on the past—and his beloved Firespray was now officially *past*. When the tractor beam had first kicked in, he had assumed it was part of Skywalker's attack. But it quickly became clear that the Rebel X-wings were just as helpless as Div and his pilots—which meant the beam was coming from the planet. *Probably some kind of Imperial defense system*, Div thought. His employer had promised that this sector of Kamino was abandoned. But Imperial defenses were sophisticated; they didn't need human personnel to operate them. No doubt this one had been left activated when the scientists had fled. Div would need to go to the central research station, deactivate the beam, and find a ship that would take him off this

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rock. The sooner he was back in the air, the sooner he could complete his mission. That is, if Skywalker hadn't died on impact.

*He's alive, Div thought. Out there somewhere. Close.*

Logic dictated that if Div had had time to eject, Skywalker and his friends probably had, too. But it wasn't logic that made him so sure. Sometimes Div just knew things. And he knew that Luke Skywalker was alive.

*Not for long, friend, Div thought. When he agreed to take a job, he never stopped until he got it done.*

It soon became clear that the city had been completely abandoned. The briefing files from his employer had included all known information about Kamino, but that wasn't saying much. Nearly all the data had focused on Tipoca City and its satellite communities. It was there, in the planet's capital, that the Republic's clone warriors had been born.

No, not born. *Made.*

*Built.*

Div suppressed a shudder, thinking of the blank, identical expressions lying beneath those blinding white hoods. He'd been only a young child when the Republic fell and the clones became Imperial weapons of terror. But he couldn't understand how anyone had been foolish enough to trust them, to see them as protectors. As anything but the face of a pitiless and indomitable enemy.

*Because they were fools, Div reminded himself. Quick to trust; quick to die. He knew that better than most.*

The images of Tipoca City in his briefing files showed a vast network of huge domed towers. Kamino's capital was nearly entirely enclosed and protected from the elements, its scientists moving through immaculate white halls, their lives showered in light.

But *this* city...well, you could hardly call it a city at all. *Research City*, the briefing file had deemed it, offering no images—only a map and blueprints of the central research

station. It was dark where Tipoca City was light, corroded with mud and grime and rust where Tipoca City was spotlessly clean. While most of the buildings were domed, in the style of Kaminoan architecture, the network of hatchways connecting them was incomplete. Div suspected that the Empire had never planned for full enclosure. It may have been the traditional Kamino way, but it was also costly and timely. This city—or outpost, really—showed all the signs of something of built in a hurry. Or half-built, at least. There were abandoned construction sites on every corner, as if the workers had left in the middle of the job. *As if they left in a hurry*, Div thought. And so the city had been left open to the elements. With no one left to care for them, the buildings were already corroding in the steady rain. Div wondered how long it would take for the lightning rods atop each dome to topple. For the domes to collapse in on themselves. For the stilts holding up the city platforms to fail. For the city to be fully reclaimed by the sea.

By that time, he planned to be long gone.

Div sloshed through rain-flooded gutters, wandering aimlessly—or so it would have seemed to anyone watching. But he had memorized a map of the city and was following a meandering path to the central research station. It was the likeliest place to find a ship. Div had learned a long time ago that a strange environment was a dangerous one. He had to find his bearings and explore the surroundings before walking blindly into what could be a trap.

Something else Div had learned long ago: Anything could be a trap.

The storm clouds cast the city in permanent shadow. Div knew that Kaminoans saw only in ultraviolet, so to them, the buildings likely shimmered in an array of colors invisible to the human eye. But to him, the city was nothing but a bleak landscape of black and white. Thunder rumbled gently in the distance, blending with the rhythmic slapping of the surf and—something else.

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Div froze midstep. The telltale click of the blaster was almost too soft to hear, but it was unmistakable. He whirled around, weapon raised, and came face to face with a blaster carbine.

"Div, right? My *leader*?" The woman holding the rifle was one of the pilots on his team, a hard-edged mercenary who'd said no more than two or three words to anyone. Clea Sook, he remembered. From Galidraan. It'd be hard to forget the black tattoos covering her face and hands—hands that were aiming a blaster at his head, without trembling. Div was pretty sure she could easily shoot him and never look back. "Any good orders you'd like to hand out now?"

"How about: Drop the blaster?" Div said, without much hope it would have an effect. "We could work together, find our way out of here twice as fast."

Clea's lips curled up in a mirthless smile.

"You really don't want to aim that at me," Div added.

"Let's see....With you alive, I split the reward four ways. With you dead, I split it three ways. Why *wouldn't* I want to aim this at you?" She laughed. "You think I can't survive on this rock without your help?"

"Maybe you can; maybe you can't," Div allowed. "But there's one thing you won't survive."

"What's that?"

"This." He struck out before she had a chance to react. His arm slashed across hers in a blur of motion. The blaster flew from her hand. In seconds, he had her on the ground, his knee on her chest, his blaster jabbing her forehead. Div tilted his head. "You sure you don't want to reconsider working together?"

She scowled at him. "Why not just kill me now, up your share of the reward?"

"Because no one's getting anything until we blast off this planet," Div said. "Besides..." Without taking his attention off her, he widened his focus to include the cityscape. It was perfectly still and silent. No signs of life. And yet he couldn't shake the feeling that something was out there. Something *wrong*.

## STAR WARS: Firefight

“Besides, no point in working alone when we can work together.”

“And if I don’t agree to buddy up?” she asked flatly, clearly already knowing the answer.

“Leave you out here, knowing you want me dead?” he asked. “Would *you* do that?”

Clea smiled, genuinely this time. “Not if I wanted to live.” She nodded. “Fine. We work together.” She raised a hand, and he shook it, then pulled her to her feet. He was pretty sure she’d strike the moment his back was turned. So he returned her blaster, but not before deactivating it with a subtle, practiced motion. She’d never know, unless she tried to shoot.

Div let Clea lead the way to the research station, devoting most of his attention to the dark corners of the silent city. Her reflexes were slow, her motions obvious. Her face was a transparent mask that announced her every impulse as soon as she had it. She was a known quantity, and that meant she wasn’t a threat.

It was the unknown that bothered him. Not *scared* him, not yet. But something was out there, in the shadows flickering in the abandoned streets. *Come and get me*, Div thought. *I’ll be ready*. He always was.

Almost *always*, he thought bitterly, brushing away the memory as soon as it arose. He’d let his guard down one time and someone else had paid the price. It wasn’t going to happen again.

Ever.

Fallon Pollo lurched down the narrow street, blood seeping from a gash in his leg. All his equipment—his food, comlink, weapons, map—had gone down with his ship. He had crashed at the edge of the city, his Preybird smashing through the roof of an abandoned barracks. The driving rains had blotted out the fire, and Fallon had escaped. No amount of money was worth this kind of grief. But then, he didn’t fly for money, did he? Not

## Alex Wheeler

anymore. All his life, he'd chased the big score, the one last job that would let him retire in style.

The job had taken ten years to find, two months to complete. Retirement had lasted about two weeks.

So he was back in the game, picking and choosing jobs at random. He had a reputation for being particular, turning down high-paying gigs for no apparent reason. The truth was he didn't have a reason for anything he did, not anymore. He worked until he became bored, then took a break—and when he was bored with playing, he worked again. He had everything a man could want: money, luxury, freedom. Now he wanted nothing, except an escape from the boredom.

And that was harder and harder to find.

He trudged aimlessly, searching for a sign of life. He kept his eyes on the ground, ignoring the gray buildings looming overhead.

Ignoring the dark shadow that trailed him, and the soft, wet slurping sounds it made as it slithered down the street.

Fallon rounded a corner, finding himself in a dark, narrow alley. It dead-ended after a few feet, abruptly dropping off into the water. Fallon hesitated at the edge, staring down at the roiling seas. Bolts of lightning danced at the horizon. Heavy clouds cast the world in permanent night. A few aiwhas, flying lizards with ten-meter wingspans, circled low on the water, searching for food. They suddenly scattered, as if spooked by his presence, and disappeared over the horizon. Fallon was wholly alone.

Thunder crashed and wind whipped across the water. Through the noise of the rising storm, Fallon couldn't hear the quiet slap of tentacles lashing the pavement.

But something made him turn around.

His face went pale. His mouth dropped open. Eyes pinned on the nightmare before him, he grasped stupidly for his blaster. Just as his hand closed around the trigger, a giant maw opened before him and the darkness swallowed him whole.

## **STAR WARS: Firefight**

Fallon Pollo was no more. Yet the creature was still hungry—and the night was alive with fresh prey.

## Chapter Five

What do you mean you have a bad feeling about this?” Han growled. “Quit messing around, you oversized hairball, and let’s go find Luke.”

Chewbacca looked nervously at the deserted streets and barked a quiet reply.

“I don’t *know* where everyone went,” Han said. “So how about we figure out a way off the planet, before they come back?”

Shrugging his massive shoulders, Chewbacca lumbered alongside Han as they followed the tracking beacon in hopes it would lead them to Luke. Han choked back a laugh, knowing that it was never a good idea to laugh at a Wookiee, even when he was your copilot and best friend. Still, he couldn’t help but chuckle over the fact that Chewbacca, who stood more than two meters tall and could crush a man’s throat in his mighty fist, was afraid of a few empty buildings.

He had to admit, the quiet was kind of creepy. Commander Narra had told them that the research station was abandoned; he hadn’t mentioned that an entire city had gone with it. What could have made all those people just drop everything and walk away?



## STAR WARS: Firefight

*Maybe they didn't walk*, Han thought, staring at an overturned speeder lying in the middle of the road. *Maybe they ran*.

Han shook his head. Now he was thinking like Chewie. Han wasn't about to let this place spook him. He had better things to do.

He and Chewbacca had landed within half a kilometer of one another. Once they'd found each other, they'd tried raising Luke on the comlink. No luck. Similar silence from Wedge and Zev. He hoped they were still up in orbit, planning a rescue. But Han wasn't willing to count on it. For all he knew, they'd given the rest of Red Squadron up for dead and headed back to Yavin 4. Or another formation of enemy pilots had blown them out of the sky. No, he didn't plan on waiting around here for rescue. He and Chewbacca and Luke would find a way out of this place themselves.

Assuming Luke was still alive.

According to the beacon, they were approaching his location. "Luke!" Han shouted, his voice echoing through the empty streets. "Hello! Anyone there? Luke!"

Chewbacca tried to quiet him, but Han shook off the Wookiee. They should be practically on top of Luke, so where was he?

He heard a quiet rustling sound behind him. He whirled around. "Luke? Where have you—*aaaaah!*" A giant lizard, its gray-green wings stretching nearly ten meters across, swooped low over Han. His coat snagged on the creature's ragged harness, and before he knew it, his feet had left the ground. "Hey! Hey, let me go, you overgrown mynock."

The creature swooped into the air, wheeling in circles through the clouds. Han scrambled for his blaster and aimed it at the beast's underbelly—but didn't pull the trigger. The ground was shrinking beneath him, and killing the creature now would lead to both of them plunging to their deaths.

*See, Highness?* he thought wryly. *I don't always shoot before I think.*

## Alex Wheeler

Han had heard about aiwhas, the giant winged cetaceans that ruled the seas and skies of Kamino. But hearing was different from *seeing*. The creature was enormous, covered with a thick, scaly hide. It was hard to believe that such a great beast could ever have been domesticted. But it surely had been—its riding harness was still in place, if a little worse for wear. The aiwha let loose a stream of ear-piercing screeches, and Han spotted several winged shadows emerging from the clouds, heeding its call.

*Just fly a little closer to the ground*, Han thought, *and I've got a little surprise for you*. As if obeying his silent command, the giant winged creature streaked toward the ground, chasing after two of its scaly friends. The aiwha in the lead let out a piercing shriek as Chewbacca sent a bolt of laserfire into its shoulder. It flapped furiously, its right wing smacking the other aiwha off course.

Startled, the aiwha holding Han ascended sharply, fleeing the blaster. “Wrong way, lizard breath!” Han shouted. But it was no use. The aiwha rose higher and higher.

Just then Luke stepped out of the shadows, his lightsaber extended over his head. “Come and get me!” he shouted at the aiwha. The blue blade slashed back and forth, a single spot of light in the dim, murky air.

*That's it*, Han thought as the aiwha streaked toward Luke. *Just a little closer to the ground and—now!* He aimed the blaster at the aiwha's underbelly.

“No!” Luke shouted. “Han, don't—”

Han squeezed the trigger as he tore at his jacket. A stream of laserfire sizzled into the aiwha, bouncing off its leathery skin. It howled in rage and pain, ascending steeply. But Han couldn't work himself loose. “Come on, birdbrain,” he growled, pounding his blaster against the buckle. “Let me *go!*”

The jacket tore. Han plummeted through the air and crashed into something soft and scratchy. It smelled like moldy muja fruit. The aiwha, still screeching and flailing from its wound, swooped toward him again. Han held it off with the blaster, trying to figure out where he'd ended up. He was in a hollow

## STAR WARS: Firefight

dish-shaped space made of grass and seaweed. Three large gray spheres were tucked beneath some of the seaweed.

*Uh-oh*, Han thought, suddenly realizing where he was. Those weren't spheres. They were *eggs*.

He was in the aiwha's nest.

Luke peered up. Way up. The nest was wedged into the roof of one of the enormous domed buildings. The creatures seemed to be afraid of Han's blaster, so he was having no trouble holding them off. But there were no obvious footholds in the sloping roof, no way for Han to climb down safely. And even if there had been, it would have meant turning his back on the creatures. Luke was pretty sure that the moment that happened, they would strike.

If Han couldn't descend by himself, Luke was going to have to rescue him. "Cover me," he told Chewbacca. The Wookiee didn't need an invitation. He hoisted his bowcaster and sprayed the skies with energy bolts. R2-D2 wheeled in circles around him, beeping and whirring in distress.

"I'm coming, Han!" Luke shouted, carving two narrow crevices into the wall with his lightsaber. He figured he could continue carving handholds and footholds for himself as he scaled his way up to the roof.

"Don't bother," Han shouted down. "I'll figure something out."

"What?" Luke called.

There was a long pause. Luke continued carving and climbing, painfully dragging himself up along the slick durasteel.

"I'm working on it!" Han finally shouted, blasting at an aiwha who'd foolishly drawn too close.

Luke would have laughed, but he needed all his energy to hold his weight. Finally, he made it to the top and pulled himself into the nest.

"I *told* you I didn't need your help," Han said, scowling. "Now we're both stuck up here. What good does that do?"

## Alex Wheeler

"This, for one thing," Luke said, pulling out his blaster and adding to Han's attack. The aiwhas shrieked and cawed, their wings beating furiously.

"They're never going to abandon the nest!" Han said. "We have to get down from here."

"That's the plan," Luke answered. "After you. I'll hold them off."

"After *you*, kid," Han insisted. The skies darkened as a thick cloud blew their way.

Far below, Chewbacca roared impatiently.

Luke's eyes widened. That was no cloud. It was a flock of aiwhas, at least twenty of them, coming straight for the nest. "How about we both go!" he said, pointing toward the flock. "*Now*."

They dived out of the nest and scrambled down the side of the building toward Chewbacca, clinging tightly to the niches carved out by the lightsaber. The aiwhas tore after them, their massive wings beating in a rhythmic thunder. Han, Luke, and Chewbacca ran through the empty streets, over permacrete gleaming in the rain, feet sloshing through puddles as they fled from the aiwhas. Soon they'd left the thunder of the wings far behind. The night was still again, silence broken only by the rumbling thunder and the distant waves.

"You're welcome," Han said once they'd all caught their breath.

"*I'm* welcome?" Luke asked incredulously. "For what?"

"We found you, didn't we?" Han said. "If we hadn't come looking for you, you'd be wandering around on your own. You would've made a nice, tasty dinner for some baby birds."

"Aiwhas are herbivores," Luke pointed out. "And I found *you*. If it weren't for me, you'd still be up in that nest, waiting to hatch."

Chewbacca growled his agreement.

"Aw, can it, furball," Han snapped. "At least I'm not afraid of the dark."

## STAR WARS: Firefight

Luke was tempted to keep arguing, but they had bigger problems to deal with. “Have you had any luck contacting Wedge or Zev?” Luke asked.

Han shook his head. “They must have been too far from the planet’s surface. Weren’t caught in the beam.”

*Unlike us*, Luke thought, flushing. It was his fault they were trapped here. *He* had been in charge of the mission, and he was the one who’d ordered that final maneuver, bringing the three of them closer to the planet’s surface. If one of them hadn’t made it, there would have been no one to blame but himself.

“Hey, kid, don’t beat yourself up about it,” Han said, as if he knew what Luke was thinking. He clapped him on the shoulder. “None of us knew about that tractor beam. You couldn’t have guessed—”

“But I knew *something* was off,” Luke insisted. “I should have...” He shook his head. He didn’t know what the right choice had been, only that he’d made the wrong one. “I should have been more careful.”

“A firefight’s no place for careful,” Han said. “And it’s no place for what-ifs. You made the call you had to make, *in that moment*. It was a good maneuver; I would have done the same. And you might have saved all our lives.”

“How do you figure that?” Luke asked, a little sourly.

“What if we’d won that fight, blasted all those ships out of the sky?” Han said. “We’d have come in for a landing, and we’d all have been caught in the beam. At least this way Wedge and Zev are still out there somewhere—hopefully coming up with a plan.”

“We can’t count on that,” Luke said.

“You’re right. And even if they are out there, they can’t do anything until we shut down that tractor beam.”

“It must be an old security system, left behind by the Empire,” Luke said. “We’ve have to find it. Then, *if* we can disable it—”

R2-D2 beeped indignantly.

## Alex Wheeler

“Okay, okay.” Luke patted R2-D2’s dome. “*When* we disable it, maybe we’ll be able to find a ship.”

“And it’d be handy if we arrived before the others,” Han added. “So let’s go.”

“Others?” Luke asked. “You think those pilots survived the crash?”

“We did,” Han pointed out.

Luke glanced over his shoulder, suddenly feeling like someone was watching them. The city was absolutely still. Nothing was out there but the rain—for now.

They decided to start by finding the research station. If there was an Imperial security system, or even a fleet of Imperial ships, that seemed the best place to find it.

The base was a low complex of black windowless domes nearly three times the size of the other buildings they’d passed. Luke had expected that they’d have to break in, but the central doors were wide open. Chewbacca growled.

“Yeah,” Han agreed. “It is strange. But they want company? I’m not arguing.” He pulled out his blaster and stepped inside. Luke followed close behind, lightsaber in hand. The blade cast an eerie blue glow over the station. Despite its size, the low ceilings gave it a claustrophobic feel, as if the curved walls were closing in on them. The entry corridor opened into a wide atrium space dotted with personal lab stations. Cages lined its perimeter, all of them empty. One quadrant of the room was given over to a large pool of water. As Luke approached, he realized that the scientists had merely opened a hole in the floor; he was peering down into the Kaminoan sea.

Turning his back on the water, Luke hesitated. He didn’t like this. The wide space was completely open. And he couldn’t shake the feeling that someone was watching.

“Come on,” Han whispered harshly. “What are you waiting for?”

“I’m not sure,” Luke said, raking his gaze across the empty station.

"There's no one here."

"Then why are you whispering?" Luke asked.

"I said, there's *no one here*," Han repeated loudly.

"Then who are we?" a voice behind them asked. Luke pivoted, blaster raised, and found himself face to face with a blaster muzzle. The man pointing the weapon was tall and thin, with an angular face covered in brown scruff. He was flanked by a sharp-toothed Chistori in full body armor and an angry-looking woman with tattoos inked across her face. Their blasters were trained on Luke, Han, and Chewbacca.

Han's blaster was armed and aimed at the Chistori's head. Chewbacca issued a low warning growl. The woman took a step back, but her blaster never wavered.

"So what now?" Luke murmured, catching Han's eye.

The woman heard him. Her lips widened into an ice-cold smile. "Now? Now you die."

## Chapter Six

Clea, stand down!” Div snapped. “You, too, Grish.”

The Chistori gave him a surly look. He drew back his lips to reveal a mouthful of jagged teeth. “I don’t think so.”

Div had seen pictures of Luke Skywalker. The Rebel had looked the same in all of them—wide-eyed, slightly dazed, clueless, and young. The man standing before him, blaster aimed, wore the same face. But he was older, angrier. That open, trusting look in his eyes was gone.

“Do me a favor, keep your blasters up,” said the one called Han Solo. “It’ll make the target practice more fun.”

The Wookiee just growled.

Div sighed. “Don’t be an idiot,” he said, speaking to both Grish and Solo. Hotheads, both of them. If the situation wasn’t under control soon, they’d probably blow each other away—and everyone else along with them. He and Clea had stumbled upon Grish shortly after teaming up—but Div couldn’t help wondering if they would have been better off without the Chistori’s so-called help. “We’re no threat to you,” he assured the Rebels.

Han laughed. “Tell me something I don’t know.”



"We have no wish to harm you," Div clarified. "So you can drop the weapons."

"You tried to blow us out of the sky!" Luke exclaimed.

"Kid's got a point," Han said. "Sounds like harm to me."

Without taking his eyes off the Rebels, Div surveyed the room, weighing the possibilities. There were only two exit points—the way they'd come in, and another corridor feeding off the opposite side of the room, leading deeper into the station. The odd pool of water lay between them, a narrow bridge offering a way across. The bridge would be a less-than-defensible position should things go bad. The lab stations would provide minimal cover, although several of them featured low durasteel cabinets that looked large enough to hold a human. But hiding wasn't really his style.

A flicker of movement along the water caught his attention. But nothing was there. *Trick of the light*, he told himself. *Must have been*. But he wasn't convinced. "We all want off this planet," Div said, feeling a sudden urgency. "Let's make that a priority, and deal with this—"

"*This?*" Luke said angrily. "That's what you call it? You attack us for no reason, you make us crash—"

"Hey, slimesuckers like that couldn't 'make' me do anything," Han protested.

"*Riiiiight*," Clea drawled. "You *wanted* to crash-land on this moldy rock."

"No more or less than you, sweetheart," Han said.

She narrowed her eyes, and her grip tightened around the blaster.

"Clea," Div said quietly. She didn't acknowledge him. But she didn't shoot, either.

"What the shunfa are we waiting for?" Grish growled. "I say we blast this scum. There's a reward waiting for us. Just because we're stuck here, no reason not to get the job done."

"Enough!" Div snapped.

## Alex Wheeler

But it was too late. “Reward?” Luke said. “So someone hired you to come after us?”

“Jabba,” Solo muttered in disgust. “I *told* him he’d have his money soon. Why can’t that fat slug just trust me?”

But Div could see that Luke wasn’t convinced. “Who was it?” Luke asked Div. “Who wants us dead?”

“That’s not your concern,” Div told him.

“Then let’s start with an easier question,” Han said. “Who are *you*?”

Div shrugged. “What’s the difference? All that matters is that we have a job to do. A job that requires us to be in the *air*,” he reminded his allies. “We’re pilots, not bounty hunters. Not *assassins*. We don’t stalk our prey on foot and shoot them in the back. We’re better than that. I say we work together. Once we’re back in space, we do what we were hired to do—best them in a firefight. *Up there*, where we belong.”

“You think we’re some kind of laserbrained nerf-herders?” Han asked. “I put this blaster down, what’s to stop you from shooting the minute I turn my back?”

“I don’t know if you’re a laserbrained nerf-herder,” Div said, although he had his suspicions. “But I give you my word that we won’t harm you, not until we’re all back in the air.”

“Your word?” Han’s mouth puckered. “What good does that do any of us?”

*Not much*, Div was about to admit, realizing that this was a losing battle. He had nothing to bargain with but his words, and they’d never been worth much. But before he could speak, he spotted Luke’s glance flicker toward something on the other side of the room—the same place Div had imagined he’d spotted a shadow in motion. Div followed Luke’s gaze and saw nothing. But Luke’s face was draining of color. He leaned toward Solo and whispered something, but the older man shrugged him off. Div searched in frustration for some sign of what had made the Rebel turn gray with fear, but there was nothing. It was as if Luke

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were in a different room, a different world than the rest of them. *What does he know that I don't?* Div thought.

Something was naggingly familiar about the way the young Rebel stood, visibly extending the reach of his senses as far as he could, opening himself up to the room. His eyes narrowed and turned toward the pool of black water.

*What?* Div thought, his stomach twisting with sudden anxiety. *What is it about you? What do you see?*

The cold pressure of alloy against his temple snapped his attention back to matters at hand, but it was too late.

"The nerf-herder's right," Clea snarled, her blaster muzzle digging into his forehead. "They have no reason to trust you. And neither do we."

Div cursed under his breath. It wasn't like him, letting an enemy sneak up on him like that. What good were his lightning reflexes and impeccable instincts if he was going to let himself be so easily distracted? "There's no need for this," he told Clea.

"Either you join us, or you die with them," Clea said. "And you die first."

Div turned to the Chistori, without much hope. "Grish—"

"Choose, human," Grish said. "Or we choose for you."

Div knew he could disarm Clea and probably Grish before either of them got off a shot. But it would leave them all vulnerable to an attack by the Rebels. He couldn't take on all five by himself.

He'd meant what he'd said: He was a pilot, not a bounty hunter. He'd been hired to best Skywalker from the cockpit. But he wasn't about to sacrifice his life for a bunch of strangers. *No difference between shooting them here and shooting them up there*, he told himself.

"Han, it's coming," Luke said suddenly, sounding alarmed.

"Kid, not now, we're—"

"No. *Now!*" Luke cried, pointing at something behind Div. "Run!"

## Alex Wheeler

Grish issued a harsh chuckle. “You think I’m going to fall for that one? Maybe *you* die first, for treating me like a koochu.” A flash of green laserfire streamed from his blaster, but Luke was already in motion, diving for cover. Solo and the Wookiee raced after Luke.

“Behind you, Grish,” Div said quietly, slowly inching backward. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Clea run. Probably the smarter move. But Div stood his ground.

“If I’m not going to buy it from him, why would I buy it from *you*? You think—*blaaaaghrangh!*” The noise he made was a combination of a gurgle, a scream, and a snort as a long, thick tentacle wrapped around his chest. His blaster clattered to the floor.

The...*thing* hoisted Grish off the ground. It was at least six meters tall, with black skin that shimmered like an oil slick. Its mouth, a gaping maw rimmed with jagged teeth, was nearly as wide as its torso. It moved with surprising speed, dragging itself on six thick, powerful tentacles. And at the tip of each tentacle, a razor-sharp retractable claw sprouted. Div’s blaster shots bounced off the beast’s scaly hide. The creature issued a keening moan but never loosened its grip on Grish. Then the beast opened its massive jaws and swallowed the Chistori whole.

## Chapter Seven

The pilots scattered. Han dived for cover beneath a storage bin. Chewbacca pried loose a strip of wall paneling and wedged himself into a crevice, shielding himself with the strip of thick transparisteel. Luke ducked behind one of the lab stations. He peered through a crack in the durasteel, watching the creature slime across the laboratory. For a beast of its size, it moved remarkably fast.

Instead of hiding, the enemy pilots ran, even though the beast stood between them and the exit. The creature was too fast for them. It cut them off and lunged toward the woman, its jaw gaping wide. She fired her blaster, but the laserfire just glanced off its scaly chest.

“No!” the other pilot shouted, raking blasterfire up and down the beast’s body, searching for a weak spot. Nothing penetrated the hide or even slowed the creature down. It pounced again. The woman darted out of the way just in time, but the creature swung at her with one of its thick tentacles and knocked her off her feet.

Luke couldn’t just stand by and watch. Even if she’d been trying to kill him a few moments before, she didn’t deserve to die

## Alex Wheeler

like this. No one did. He jumped up from behind the lab station and shot his blaster at the ceiling. “Over here!”

“What do you think you’re doing?” Han whispered fiercely from his hiding space.

Luke ignored Han—and the creature ignored Luke, who rushed to help the pilots. But before he could reach them, the woman let loose a bloodcurdling scream. And she was gone.

There was no time to panic or mourn. The creature was still hungry. Luke joined the other pilot. The beast looked even larger close up. It loomed over them, at least three times their size. Luke sprayed it with blasterfire, searching for a stretch of skin that wasn’t covered by leathery armored hide. But the monster’s flesh seemed impenetrable. Their combined blasterfire was holding the creature at bay, but just barely. The distance between them narrowed.

Suddenly, there was a loud crack, and a chunk of duracrete exploded from the ceiling, crashing down on the creature’s head. It spasmed in pain and jerked out of the way, revealing Han and Chewbacca standing behind it, their weapons aimed at the ceiling. “What are you staring at, kid?” Han shouted. “Let’s blast this thing back where it came from!”

Luke began firing again, this time aiming for the monster’s gaping mouth, in hopes that it would be more sensitive than the rest of the creature’s body. Luke’s laserfire strafed the creature’s thick black tongue, and it began to shriek with pain. Driven backward by the combined firepower of four blasters, wounded and in pain, the creature lashed a long tentacle at Han and Chewbacca, knocking them off their feet. “Han!” Luke cried in alarm.

But the creature didn’t move in for the kill. Instead, having cleared a path for itself, it slithered swiftly across the room and plunged into the large pool of water with a noisy splash. It disappeared beneath the surface, leaving nothing behind but rippling water and a trail of blood.

Div stared at the spot where Clea had lain waiting for the creature to strike. At the last moment, she'd stopped fighting back; she'd given up. He had seen it in her eyes: the dull, hopeless look of a cornered animal just waiting to die.

*That will never be me*, he told himself. He'd seen too much death to give himself up to it willingly. Fight to the last breath—that was the only way to stay alive.

Someone tapped his shoulder, and he flinched, instinctively swiveling his blaster toward the nearest target. Luke Skywalker.

"I said, are you all right?" Luke asked.

The other one, Han Solo, said nothing. But he kept his blaster aimed steadily at Div's head. The Wookiee stood by his side, growling warily.

"Fine," Div said shortly. He didn't like standing out in the open like this. The creature could be back at any moment. And it didn't give him much comfort that the combined strength of three blasters had done little more than irritate its hide.

"I guess now we know why this place was abandoned," Han said, shaking his head. "What *was* that thing?"

"The latest Imperial *wonder*," Div said darkly. "Aren't we lucky to live in a time of such advanced civilization?"

Luke's eyes widened. "You think the Empire *created* that thing?" he asked.

It had been less than a minute, and Div was already exhausted by the Rebel's breathless naïveté. "Kaminoan scientists employed by the Empire," he said, annoyed by having to explain something so basic. "They're expert genetic manipulators, and obviously that...*creature* didn't have natural origins."

Luke and Han exchanged a glance, and Han gave Luke a nearly imperceptible nod. "Surprised you're not more impressed," Han said.

"Impressed? By the Emperor's latest killing machine?" Div raised an eyebrow. "The slaughter of innocent people doesn't impress me, nor the tools used to do it."

## Alex Wheeler

“That’s surprising coming from someone who turned *himself* into an Imperial killing machine,” Luke said angrily.

Div stiffened. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means if you hate the Empire so much, why would you work for them?”

“Easy. I wouldn’t.”

Luke laughed. “Who do you think sent you out here to kill us?”

“None of your business,” Div said angrily. “But I assure you it wasn’t the Empire.”

“Why, because they *told* you so?” Luke’s sarcasm was heavy and awkward, and Div could tell it wasn’t a tone the Rebel adopted very often.

But the taunt was harder to shrug off than it should have been. Div liked to tell himself that he didn’t do business with the Empire. But these days, when you followed money, you often found yourself at the Emperor’s doorstep. If it wasn’t the Empire, it was Jabba’s gang, and if it wasn’t Jabba, it was Xizor and the Black Sun syndicate—and when you dug deep enough, there was no real difference between them. They were all bloodthirsty thugs who’d acquired a taste for power. It was true that Div had never knowingly worked for any of them.

But ignorance was easy when you didn’t want to know.

*What would Trever think?* The thought popped into his head without his permission, and he blotted it out just as quickly. He knew exactly what Trever would have thought—that he’d sold out, abandoned his principles, abandoned his people. That he’d given up, just like Clea, and was now just waiting to die.

But Trever was the one who’d died.

The Empire had taken his mother, his stepfather, everyone he’d ever known or cared about. Not to mention Ry-Gaul, Solace, Garen Muln...all the names and faces he’d forced himself to forget. And Div had learned his lesson. You did what you needed to do to survive. Even if it meant keeping your head down and your mouth shut.



## STAR WARS: Firefight

"How about you lower that blaster?" he suggested to Han.

"How about I put a hole in you before you put one in me?" Han shot back.

"You want to shoot me, shoot me," Div said, thinking, *Good luck with that*. Han's reflexes were fast; that was clear enough. But he was no match for Div. "All I care about is escaping this planet in one piece."

"So you can kill us in space?" Luke said snidely.

Div shrugged. "May the best pilot win, right? But we'll never know who that is until we're back up there. So how about no one blasts anyone until that happens? Deal?" He lowered his blaster. Someone had to go first.

"I don't make deals with men who try to kill me," Han growled. "It's a quick way to end up dead." But he lowered his blaster, too. He jerked his head at Luke. "Come on, kid. Let's go find ourselves a ship."

Div watched them file out of the laboratory, the tiny astromech droid wheeling dutifully behind. Han paused in the doorway, glaring at Div. "Well?" he drawled. "What are you waiting for?"

Han waited impatiently as R2-D2 probed the research station's computer system. "Take your time," he said sarcastically after several minutes had elapsed. "It's not like we're in any danger."

But the little astromech droid kept working with his manipulator arm plugged into the socket, softly whirring as he sifted through the reams of data. They had concluded that the computer was the best place to start. Rather than wandering randomly through the station, hoping luck would show them the way, they had decided to leave their fate up to R2-D2's data-crunching skills.

At least, *Luke* had decided. When it came to a choice between trusting his gut and trusting a droid, Han chose his gut, each and every time. Even though their mission had gone astray,

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Luke was still in charge. And Han had to admit that a map would come in handy. *If* the scraphead could find one.

With a triumphant trill of beeps and whistles, R2-D2 drew them over to the computer screen. A detailed schematic of the research station spread across it, two docking bays clearly marked on opposite ends of the building.

“Good job, Artoo!” Luke said, patting the astromech’s silver-plated head.

“That’s some droid,” the enemy pilot said.

Han glared at him. He’d agreed to let the man come along on their search for ships—no doubt an extra blaster could come in handy—but that didn’t make them allies. The temporary truce didn’t extend to polite small talk.

“Let’s go,” Han said gruffly. “We’ll find ourselves a ship while the droid deals with the security system.” A ship would do them no good if they couldn’t disable the tractor beam that had dragged them to the surface to begin with.

“You want to leave Artoo *behind*?” Luke asked.

Chewbacca growled his own hesitation at the idea.

Luke shook his head. “I don’t—”

“What are you worried about?” Han cut in. They couldn’t waste any more time; the longer they stuck around, the shorter their lives were likely to be. “You think that...*whatever* you want to call it would eat a rusty bucket of bolts when there’s so much fresh meat wandering around? He’ll be fine.”

“He’s probably right,” the enemy pilot said. “From what I could tell of the creature, organic-based nutrients seem to be—”

“Let’s go,” Han said shortly, shooting the pilot a nasty look. As if he needed the man’s help to convince Luke of the obvious. “Sooner we go, sooner we can come back for him.”

“He’s right, you’ll be fine,” Luke told R2-D2, sounding unconvinced. “You sure you can disable that security system?”

The droid beeped confidently.

Luke still looked worried. “We’ll come back for you, Artoo. I promise.”

Han cleared his throat. “Enough with the tearful good-byes, kid.”

“Let’s go,” Luke agreed.

They crept down the dark hallways single file. Chewbacca took the lead, his bowcaster in his hands, ready to fire. Han followed him, darting his eyes from side to side, seeking out any dark corner in which a monster might lurk. Luke brought up the rear, keeping his eyes peeled for a threat from behind—or from the mystery pilot, who could turn on them at any moment.

Their footsteps echoed through the empty station. Dim, flickering emergency lights lined the corridor, casting off an eerie glow. Several of the rooms they passed contained large pools of water—some man-made like the one in the atrium, others little more than large jagged gashes in the floor, as if something large and angry had chewed its way through. Han suppressed a shudder and focused on putting one foot in front of the other.

Nothing interrupted the quiet but their footfalls and a rhythmic drip, water droplets spattering to the durasteel floor.

*Drip.*

*Drip.*

*Drip.*

Han looked up suddenly, a drop of water splashing onto his forehead. The water was flowing in small rivulets from large overhead gratings. They likely led to air or heating ducts—but that wouldn’t explain where the water was coming from.

Unless...

Han froze. “Chewie,” he whispered, swiveling his blaster toward the nearest grate, “Luke, do either of you—”

There was a strangled scream behind him. *Div.* Han whirled around—just in time to see the monstrous beast looming over Luke. A busted ceiling grate lay on the floor next to him.

“Look out, kid!” Han shouted, firing at the beast. But he was too late. The jaws were already descending toward Luke. A moment later, they’d swallowed him whole. “No!” Han screamed. He and Chewbacca unleashed all their firepower on

## Alex Wheeler

the monstrous creature. It roared and fled from the blasts, slithering up the wall and disappearing into the air ducts.

Han couldn't breathe. It had all happened so fast. One scream, one blur of motion, and then nothing left but the acrid stench of smoke and charred flesh. He squeezed his hands around his blaster, silently urging the beast to return so he could slaughter it.

But the beast was gone.

The enemy pilot was gone.

And Luke—

Han staggered against the wall. Chewbacca moaned.

Luke was gone.

## Chapter Eight

Luke woke up screaming.

He opened his eyes, but the world remained totally dark.

He was trapped somewhere, sealed up tightly against the light. *Either that or I'm blind*, Luke thought, trying to keep the panic at bay. After all, it was a miracle he wasn't dead. Yet. He tried to focus on that.

He couldn't move.

*Blind and paralyzed*, he thought, struck by a sudden horror. *Maybe I am dead. Maybe this is what death means.*

An eternity, silent and motionless. An eternity frozen in this dark nothing.

No. As the panic wore off and his surroundings came into sharper detail, Luke realized that he could still *feel* his arms and legs. He could even contract the muscles. He just couldn't move, not an inch. Some kind of warm, sticky slime was holding him in place. It was pulsing, squeezing him with a slow, steady rhythm. Like a heartbeat.

Suddenly, he knew exactly where he was. And the panic returned.

The last thing he'd seen was the beast's mouth closing over him. *I'm inside the creature*, Luke realized. *It ate me and now...*

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And now what? Would he lie here encased in glop while the creature slowly digested him? For a moment, he wished he'd never woken up.

But he dismissed the thought. As long as he was alive, he could fight. He struggled to break free of the slime. If he could just reach his lightsaber, he could slice his way out. But his arm wouldn't budge. He was pinned tightly.

*We're moving*, Luke thought, his stomach lurching. *It feels like we're falling.*

He had no way to find out if that was true and no way to save himself. He was helpless.

*It's not supposed to end this way*, Luke thought angrily. *The Rebellion needs me. Leia needs me.*

*Like I needed Ben*, he thought. *And Aunt Beru. And Uncle Owen.*

All of them dead now, needed or not.

Luke struggled with renewed energy against the gunk. Maybe he was doomed. But he wasn't about to give up. Until the very last moment, he would struggle. He would fight.

He would hope.

The chamber contracted. The walls crushed Luke in on himself. An iron grip seized his lungs, squeezing out his last breath. *This is it*, he thought.

And then he felt himself rolling through the slimy darkness and was flung into the light. The creature had vomited him up. Luke drew in a deep, heaving breath. He was lying on a flat bed of rock, coated with a sticky fluid. He was in a cave of some kind, with a deep pool at its center. The creature loomed over him, lips drawn back to reveal its jagged teeth. Luke whipped out his blaster and pulled the trigger. There was a soft pop, a fizzle of smoke—then nothing. He dropped the blaster and grabbed his lightsaber just as the creature shook its mighty head and slithered away. Before Luke could activate the weapon, the beast had disappeared into the water.

## STAR WARS: Firefight

Luke clipped the lightsaber back to his belt and climbed to his feet. He wasn't alone. The remaining enemy pilot lay on his side, gasping and heaving. It sounded like he was coughing up his organs. Luke knelt by his side. "Are you all right?"

The man shook him off and pushed himself into a sitting position. "I've been swallowed by a giant...whatever-that-was and expelled into its blasted lair," he said in a rasping voice. He drew in a few more deep breaths, then stood up. "Does that seem all right to you?"

The cave was small and dark, with stalactites overhead that reminded Luke of the creature's jagged teeth. A foul stench clogged the air, but he couldn't be sure whether that was coming from the cave or from the slime that coated him from head to toe.

"The creature escaped through there," Luke said, pointing at the pool of water. "There must be some kind of opening to the outside." They didn't have much choice but to follow its example.

Luke jumped first, hoping the beast wouldn't be waiting for him. Holding his breath, he dived down through a wide underwater tunnel, trusting it would lead him back up to the surface. But instead, it released him into the open sea. Luke looked up, but he was too deep to even see the surface. Everywhere he looked, the world was only water.

A tightening in his chest made him realize he'd be out of air soon. He'd only recently learned how to swim. But even a champion swimmer wouldn't be able to hold his breath long enough to make it up to the surface. He had no choice but to turn back the way he'd come. Back to the cave.

Luke burst out of the water with no breath to spare. He drew in several lungfuls of the clammy cave air, grateful to breathe again. The pilot pulled himself back up onto the rocks next to Luke, not breathing nearly as hard. At least the water had washed away most of the slime.

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"It must be an underwater sea cave," the pilot said. "An air pocket deep underwater. No way we'll make it back up there on our own. Not alive, at least."

"So that's it?" Luke said, frustrated. "We're trapped here forever? Why didn't that thing just eat us? Why dump us here to wait for us to starve to death?"

"I don't know why we're here, but I think we have more pressing concerns."

"What?" Luke followed the pilot's gaze, hoping he'd found another way out.

But the pilot wasn't looking at an escape route. He was looking at a large pile wedged into a niche in the cave. It was a heap of garbage. Seaweed, decaying sea grass, rotted fruit cores, ragged strips of plasteel, and lying on top—

Luke looked away, horrified. "Is that...?"

"Grish B'reen," the pilot said. "Or at least...it was."

The Chistori was dead. His body, or what was left of it, had been torn to pieces. And it looked like they'd been partially...*digested*.

"I don't think that beast brought us here to die," the pilot said. "I think this is its nest and it's keeping us around until it's hungry again. Like the cavern spiders of Dathomir. I think it likes to *snack*. And that means when dinnertime comes around..."

"We better not be here anymore," Luke said, glancing back and forth between the water and the Chistori's remains. "One way or another."



## Chapter Nine

**C**alm down, you hairy oaf!” Han shouted at Chewbacca, who was howling with sorrow and rage. He shook his head. Was there anything more pathetic than a weeping Wookiee? “Luke’s gone,” he said, choking on the words. “There’s nothing we can do about that. We have to focus on saving ourselves.”

Chewbacca let out a few more snuffling hoots, but he followed Han deeper into the research station. According to the map, they weren’t far from the docking bay. If they found a working ship, they’d be off the planet in no time. If not...well, Han decided not to think about that until he had to.

Just like he wouldn’t think about Luke, swallowed up by that giant beast. Gone forever. All because Han had turned his back for a moment, had let Luke die.

*Focus, Han reminded himself angrily. Escape first, guilt later.*

They stuck to the plan, crept through the dark corridors, eyes and ears peeled for anything out of the ordinary. For slurping tentacles, for gnashing teeth, for drops of water spattering to the floor. Han gripped his blaster, almost hoping that the creature would find them. It had taken Luke—and for that, it deserved to die.

## Alex Wheeler

But the station was silent, the corridors empty. Their footsteps echoed. Their breath fogged in the chill air. It began to seem like they were wandering in circles, like they would be trapped in the hollow station forever. They rounded a corner, and there it was: the docking bay.

“Ships!” Han cried. Of course, from the look of things, they barely deserved the name. But he knew from experience that you couldn’t judge a ship by its rusty frame. Plenty of fools had underestimated the *Millennium Falcon*.

The Kaminoans had left behind only their oldest, most battle-scarred ships, but at least a handful of them looked to be spaceworthy. Han spotted two Howlrunners with minimal scorching on the hull. Behind them, coated in grime, was an ARC-170 fighter, a distant ancestor of the Rebel X-wings. Those hadn’t been flown since the Clone Wars, and rumor had it they’d been the ship of choice for the Republic’s top pilots. Han had always wanted to take one for a spin. He didn’t know what a ship like this would be doing way out on Kamino, but he wasn’t about to let the opportunity go to waste.

Han jerked his head toward one of the Howlrunners. “Chewie, you check that one. I’ll take the ARC.”

It took only moments to figure out the rudimentary control system. The ship wouldn’t have the power or the maneuverability of the X-wing, but the hyperdrive was powerful enough to make it back to Yavin 4, and that was all that mattered. He powered up the engines and navigational systems. Everything checked out. System diagnostics didn’t indicate any problems. Chewbacca reported the same about the Howlrunner.

“You know what this means, don’t you, buddy?” Han exclaimed. “We’re going home.”

Chewbacca barked a mournful reply.

“You’re right,” Han said quietly. “*Some* of us are going home.”

*Sorry, kid,* he thought, a silent apology to Luke. *Wish you were coming with us.*

But Luke would remain on Kamino forever.

They couldn't take off without retrieving R2-D2, even though it meant risking another face-to-face with the dripping sea monster. They made it back to the central computer terminal safely. There was just one problem: R2-D2 had plans of his own. And they didn't include the docking bay.

"I said, *let's go*, you rustbucket!" Han shouted for a third time. But the little astromech droid just beeped and wheeled in exuberant circles. It was like his logic circuits had melted. He beeped again, louder this time, then rolled halfway down the hall before spinning around and returning to Han. His manipulator arm zigzagged through the air.

Chewbacca growled.

"I *know* he's trying to tell me something," Han snapped. "I just don't know *what*." And he wasn't in the mood for guessing games. Maybe the little guy was just upset about Luke being missing. "Come on, pal," he said in a gentler voice, trying not to lose his temper. "Whatever you have to tell us, it can wait."

R2-D2 beeped something that could have been a yes; then he began wheeling speedily down the hall.

"You see that?" Han said triumphantly, grinning at Chewbacca. "You've just got to know how to talk to—*hey!*"

The astromech droid had turned off the main corridor and was heading down a dark, narrow hallway, *away* from the docking bay.

"Where are you going?" Han shouted. "Come back here!"

If it had been up to him, he'd have ditched the blasted thing. Saving R2-D2 from his own foolishness wasn't worth it. But...

"Luke would never forgive us if we left the little guy behind," Han said wearily. Chewbacca was already down the hall in pursuit of the droid. Han shook his head and followed. "I'm only doing this for you, Luke," he muttered. He could just imagine the look on Luke's face if his precious astromech droid were abandoned on Kamino.

## Alex Wheeler

But thinking about that just led him to imagine *Leia's* face when she heard what had happened to Luke. When she heard what Han had *allowed* to happen to Luke.

"She'll never forgive me." Han stared at the ground, wishing the sea monster would appear again. Shooting at things always made him feel better.

R2-D2 came to a stop in front of a narrow transparisteel door. He plugged his manipulator arm into the control panel by the door and began fiddling with the circuits. A moment later, the door slid open.

"What are you doing?" A thin, warbling voice echoed through the hallway. "Shut that door! Shut it! Shut it! *Noooooooooo!*" The voice turned into a howl. Without thinking, Han shoved Chewbacca and the droid through the door. It slid closed behind them with a solid clank.

They were in a cramped, narrow space, a little larger than a storage closet. Its shelves and tables were cluttered with test tubes, datapads, and other scientific detritus. And they weren't alone.

A gaunt, aged Kaminoan huddled in a corner of the room, fingers flying furiously across the keys of a large computer. He was tall and emaciated, with pale, luminescent white skin and bulging gray eyes that filled nearly half of his face. An inverted triangle, his head narrowed at the chin, held erect on a neck that was nearly as long and thin as his spindly arms. He was draped in a tattered lab coat that had faded to a dusty gray. "Who are you?" His voice was creaky and hesitant, like it hadn't been used for quite some time.

"Who are *you*?" Han shot back.

The Kaminoan stood up, brushing himself off. He stepped in front of a large computer console, blocking the screen from view. "I am Elo Panil." There was a haughty undertone to the words. "This is my research station—which would make you trespassers."

"Don't worry," Han said. "We're on our way out."

Chewbacca barked a suggestion.

Han sighed. On the one hand, this scientist had been working for the Empire. On the other hand, he couldn't leave an innocent man there to die. "You can come with us, if you'd like."

"Come with you?" The Kaminoan gaped at them, wild-eyed. "And leave my research behind? Are you mad?" He shook his head and turned his back to the intruders. Then he stepped aside, revealing the images playing across the wide screen. They were grainy black-and-white shots of the research station. "I've been watching you," the scientist said. He rubbed his spindly fingers nervously along the ridges at the base of his skull. "You're interfering with the experiment. I can't have impurities in my research, I simply can't. That would be very bad indeed."

Han and Chewbacca exchanged incredulous glances. "*Experiment?*" Han asked. "That's what you call that thing?"

"Certainly. And a successful one, at that." The Kaminoan faced them again, smiling proudly. "Who in the galaxy is more skilled in genetic manipulation? No one. Our clones have proven that, without doubt."

"Without doubt," Han muttered, grimacing. "Congratulations."

The Kaminoan didn't pick up on the sarcasm. "Thank you. So of course when the Empire came to us with their latest request, we were honored. They needed an organic superweapon to squelch resistance in a number of ground wars. So we set to work creating the ultimate beast."

"But things went wrong," Han said, prompting him.

"Wrong? *Wrong?*" The scientist's voice took on its first hint of real emotion. He was insulted. "To the contrary, they went *right*. The beast was everything we could have hoped for—and more. We never guessed how deadly such a creature could be. How efficient. And if my other, more timid colleagues preferred to run for their lives, instead of completing our work..."

"So that's where everyone went?" It was just as he'd thought. "They fled...the beast?"

## Alex Wheeler

"Some fled. Others..." The Kaminoan flicked a long, spindly hand, as if their fates were of no consequence to him. "Well, they learned firsthand the triumph of our creation."

"And you've been here ever since," Han said. "Watching."

The Kaminoan nodded. "I have food. I have my research. What else could I possibly need?"

*How about a straitjacket?* Han thought. But he kept his mouth shut.

Pleased to have an audience for his brilliance, the Kaminoan had begun muttering about all the marvelous capacities he'd built into the beast. "Armored skin. Durasteel piercing claws. Night vision. A venomous sting. The beast can kill a man in seconds, or transport living prisoners, when required. Now, *that* was a tricky one."

"What was that?" Han asked, suddenly paying attention again. "Prisoner transportation?"

"Of course, of course," the Kaminoan said eagerly. "A prickly problem indeed. The ultimate weapon is a flexible weapon, yes? The Empire wanted the capacity to capture and transport prisoners alive, when necessary. Difficult, yes? Not so difficult, as it turns out. Maybe creatures deliver their food to the nest intact, feasting on it at leisure. Or offering it as a communal food source. Brillizards, tropotaurs, the cavern spiders of Dathomir—"

"Enough!" Han exclaimed. "You mean when the beast eats someone, they don't die?"

"Not always, no," the Kaminoan said. "Some prey is transported, alive, in the creature's stomach, to the feeding ground."

"The beast swallowed my friend," Han said, hardly daring to hope. "Do you think...he could still be alive?"

There was a long pause.

"Possible," the Kaminoan said finally.

Chewbacca let out a joyous howl.

## STAR WARS: Firefight

"Of course, the delivery mechanism was never *quite* perfected. We had certain problems with suffocation. And acidic decomposition."

Chewbacca released another howl, this one less enthused.

"Look on the bright side," the Kaminoan said reassuringly. "At least if your friend died in transit, he won't be alive when the beast begins to feed."

Han wanted to throttle the scientist. "That's our *friend* you're talking about," he said. "What's wrong with you?"

"The only thing wrong with me is that you're interrupting my research," the Kaminoan said.

R2-D2 beeped.

"You're right, we're wasting time," Han said. "Look, we're going to go rescue our friend, and then we're leaving this planet. We can take you along, if you want."

"All I want is to be left alone," the scientist said, turning his back on them again.

"Suit yourself." Han slammed a fist into the control panel, and the door slid open.

"I'd advise you to forget your friend," the Kaminoan said, hunching over his computer. "He's lost to you."

"Which means you don't know where the sea monster would've taken him," Han said.

"Of course not," the Kaminoan straightened. "My creation is far too brilliant to let anyone know where its lair is located."

"Well, we're not going anywhere without Luke," Han said. "We arrived together; we'll leave together."

The Kaminoan shook with a harsh, ragged chuckle. "You'll die together."

Han shot him one last sour glance before the door slipped shut. "Better than dying alone."

## Chapter Ten

**D**iv dumped his blaster in disgust. Maybe the seawater had flooded it; maybe something corrosive in the creature's innards had damaged it. Either way, it no longer worked. They were weaponless. And trapped. But not helpless.

Div never allowed himself to be helpless.

"That *thing* could be back soon," he told Luke, who was gazing into the water as if it would yield the secret of their salvation. "There must be something around here we can turn into a weapon." He started sifting through the damp, moss-covered rocks, careful to keep his back to the pile of debris and Chistori remains. He hadn't let himself wonder about what had happened to Clea's body. Maybe the beast only saved its food after it had been fully sated by an earlier meal. Maybe Clea's death had saved their lives.

Or maybe she was there after all, resting in pieces, beneath Grish.

Div had never thought of himself as a squeamish person. And something might be buried in the detritus that could serve as a weapon. Grish's blaster might even have made it through intact. But Div just couldn't bring himself to look. Not yet.



## STAR WARS: Firefight

“Well?” he snapped at Luke. “You going to stand there and daydream, or you going to help me find a weapon?”

Luke jerked his eyes away from the water. “When that thing comes back, I’ll be ready.” He pulled a slim gray rod from beneath his coat. A beam of blue light blazed from the base.

Div’s eyes widened. He felt all his breath sucked out of him, like he was back in the creature’s belly again. And in an instant, he was on top of Luke, his hand around the Rebel’s throat. The lightsaber dropped to the ground and rolled a few feet away.

“Get off me!” Luke shouted, but Div only tightened his hold. He dragged Luke off the ground and pinned him to the cave wall, banging his head against the rocks. “Where’d you get it?” he growled. “The lightsaber?”

“It’s mine,” Luke gasped, trying to suck in more air. Div’s fingers tightened around his windpipe.

“The truth,” Div whispered harshly. “Jedi leave their lightsabers behind only in death. So are you a thief or a murderer? Or *both*?”

Luke stopped his feeble attempts to escape. Instead, he squeezed his eyes shut and stretched a hand toward the lightsaber. Div watched him for a moment in disbelief. Was the Rebel pilot actually trying to *summon* the lightsaber? Was he trying to access...the Force?

“One more time,” Div said, watching Luke carefully. He would recognize a lie when he saw it. “Where did you find the Jedi weapon?”

“My father,” Luke choked out. “It belonged to my father.”

Div searched Luke’s face. The Rebel’s expression was as sincere as his voice. But Div didn’t need the confirmation. He knew it was the truth. Maybe he’d known since the first time he’d seen Luke, that moment in the lab when Luke had disappeared inside himself. The truth was in the way Luke moved, the way he held himself. And when Div released him, the truth was in the way Luke snatched the lightsaber from the ground and held it to

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himself. After checking it for damage, he activated the blade and faced Div.

His grip was clumsy, his stance unbalanced, but there was no mistaking it: This was Luke's rightful weapon.

Which could mean only one thing.

"This lightsaber belonged to my father, and now it belongs to me," Luke said, his tone a warning.

Weapon or not, Div could have disarmed him easily. But he had no desire to do so. Not anymore. "Your father was a Jedi," Div said quietly. It wasn't a question.

Luke nodded. "And so am I."

The young man actually sounded *proud*.

"All you are is a blasted fool," Div spat, "if you think being a Jedi is anything other than a death sentence."

Luke advanced with the lightsaber. Div held up his hands. "No need," he said calmly. "You have nothing to fear from me. But out there..." He gestured to the water, to the wider galaxy, where a man would have to be insane to label himself a Jedi. "You have no idea what kind of misery you're going to attract."

"You know about the Jedi?" Luke asked searchingly with a hopeful note in his voice.

"No."

"But you said—"

"I know only what everyone else knows," Div said tersely. "The Jedi are dead and gone. All of them."

"Not all of them," Luke said.

"Not yet."

"But—" Before Luke could persist with his annoying questions, the water rippled and churned. The creature surfaced, dragging itself onto the rocks with giant tentacles. Luke raised the lightsaber and rushed at the beast.

"Luke, no!" Div shouted.

But Luke ignored him and slashed at the creature with rough, clumsy strokes. The beast moaned in pain once, twice, proof that Luke had made glancing contact with his thick hide. But then a

thick tentacle slashed the air, slamming hard into Luke's stomach. The aspiring Jedi flew backward across the cave, his lightsaber sailing in the opposite direction. Div darted forward, snatching the weapon in midair.

As if sensing the danger, the creature turned toward him. Div was ready. It should have felt strange to hold a lightsaber again. And in a way, it was. The hilt seemed too small in his hand, too light. He overcompensated at first, swinging hard against the creature and nearly stumbling when the blade met little resistance. But the confusion, the clumsiness, it lasted no more than a second or two. Then...it was like coming home. The blade danced wildly, lighting up the dim cave. He ducked beneath a swinging tentacle, leapt over another one. The blade sliced through the tentacles like they were made of air. The creature shrieked in rage and pain, its keens echoing through the cave as Div lashed out with the blade once, twice—again and again.

He didn't stop until the cries faded to silence and the creature was dead on the ground, sliced into pieces. When he looked up, Luke was staring at him in astonishment.

"Where did you learn how to do that?" Luke asked in a hushed voice.

Div shrugged. "What's to learn? It's just a blade, like any other."

"But I thought only a Jedi could—"

"I don't care what you think," Div said stiffly. "I've been around. I've seen this kind of weapon before. That's all, nothing more." He looked down at the lightsaber. It was so much more graceful than a blaster, so much more deadly. And for just a moment, he was tempted to claim it as his own.

But that would mean claiming far more than the weapon, and the time for that had passed long ago.

"Here," he said, and tossed the lightsaber to Luke. "This is yours. Take better care of it this time."

"Were you trained by Jedi?" Luke asked eagerly. "Who were they? What were they like? Are any of them still...?"

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*Alive*, Div thought. *That's what he wants to ask, but he can't bring himself to say the word. Because he knows the answer.* "The past is past," he said. "I don't talk about it."

"But why do you—" Luke caught the steely expression on Div's face and cut himself off. He cleared his throat. "You could at least tell me your name," he said after a moment. "Or is that part of the secret past, too?"

"Div," he said, because that was the name he'd gone by for nearly two decades. But then he hesitated. If Luke knew about the Jedi, what else did he know about? "Lune Divinian," he said carefully, watching Luke's face for a flicker of recognition. *Something*. But there was nothing.

And Div found he was disappointed.

He shook it off. "So, we're not going to be eaten anytime soon," he said, approaching the dead beast. "All that means is a long, boring death, unless we can figure a way out of here. Of course, there could be more than one."

"What if we went *out* the same way we came *in*," Luke mused.

"We're trying to *avoid* being breakfast," Div reminded him. "And even if the thing weren't dead, I don't speak monster well enough to request that it not digest us this time around. Do you?"

Luke ignored the taunt. "We know its stomach is airtight," he said, "and can hold enough air for us to breathe until we reach the surface. So if we could find a way to use it, turn it into some kind of waterproof casing—"

"Like a submarine," Div said, suddenly hopeful. The so-called Jedi was smarter than he looked.

"You think it could work?"

Div couldn't help sneaking a look at Grish's dead body and at the moss-covered bones littering the floor of the cave. "I think it has to."

## Chapter Eleven

**Y**ou sure this gadget's going to work?" Han asked as R2-D2 put the finishing touches on the modified tracking device.

The droid beeped irritably and continued his work.

"Well, hurry it along," Han said impatiently.

Chewbacca issued a warning growl.

"How do *you* know he's doing the best he can?" Han asked.

"That bucket of bolts acts like we have all the time in the world."

R2-D2 beeped again, and Chewbacca barked at Han.

"No, I *won't* admit that we wouldn't have found the scientist if it weren't for him. I had a feeling there was someone else on the station. Besides, even a laserbrain could have guessed that Luke might still be alive somewhere."

Chewbacca didn't even dignify that with an answer. Han ignored the Wookiee and concentrated on the astromech droid. He knew that yelling at R2-D2 wasn't going to speed things up, but he couldn't help himself. He was impatient. The longer they hung around, the greater chance that the beast would return.

Of course, that was what they were hoping for—but not yet. Not until they were ready.

R2-D2 whistled triumphantly and held the modified tracker out to Han. He examined the device. Even he had to admit that

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it was nice work. Especially considering that all the droid had to work with were the homing beacons from the left-over Kaminoan craft. “You sure this will work?”

The droid beeped and wheeled across the room, indicating that it was time for the next phase of their plan. Han took a deep breath and followed. This was it: If the plan worked, the beast would eat the tracker. If not, it would eat Han.

Han grinned. *Either way, kid, looks like I'll be seeing you soon.*

Han shifted his weight, trying not to seem nervous. What was there to be nervous about? So he was sitting in the middle of the abandoned laboratory, carefully positioned near the pool of still, dark water, waiting for a disgusting sea creature to attack. So what?

“Any day now, you slimesucker,” Han muttered, wondering what was taking so long. *Maybe it only feeds once a day*, he thought. *Or once a month.*

But he pushed those doubts out of his mind. This had to work. Luke was counting on him.

The water rippled.

Han tensed, blaster in one hand, homing beacon in the other.

A massive scaled snout emerged, jaws wide, jagged teeth gleaming in the dim light. Han took an involuntary step back, then steadied himself. This plan depended on split-second timing. He couldn't run away, not until the time was right.

The creature slithered out of the water, its tentacles slapping hard against the durasteel floor. It reared up, scenting prey. Han froze as the beast loomed over him. He'd never been this close before. But now he could see the black pupils pooling in wide eyes, the drops of water trickling down its thick, pitted hide, the sharp stingers embedded along its tentacles, the deep, dark gully of its throat as it opened its jaws improbably wide and swooped down...

Chewbacca's panicked howl snapped Han out of his horrified trance.

“Now!” Han shouted.

Chewbacca fired a burst of laserfire straight at the creature’s mouth. As it let loose an agonized howl, Han drew back his arm and pitched the tracking device straight into the creature’s gaping maw. Before it could recover, he scampered out of the way, racing for the other side of the room. Chewbacca kept firing, careful to aim for the beast’s tentacles and armored torso. The last thing they wanted now was to kill the creature before it led them back to Luke.

As the beast screeched and writhed in the hail of laserfire, searching in vain for its attacker, Han crept out of the laboratory and locked the door shut behind him. He joined Chewbacca, who was aiming his blaster through a narrow hole they’d drilled in the wall.

“Enough,” Han said quietly.

The Wookiee stopped firing, and Han peered through the hole, eager to see what the creature would do next. It slithered around the laboratory, searching for something—someone—to eat. Maybe it smelled Han, or maybe it spotted his eye flickering behind the hole in the wall, because it edged closer and closer to his hiding spot, flattening its head against the hole. Han flinched and drew back. The beast slammed a tentacle against the wall, and another. Han held his breath, his hands tight around the blaster. He didn’t want to kill the beast.

But he wasn’t about to die in its place.

The creature was strong, but the durasteel was stronger. The wall held.

The laboratory had other exits. If the creature was determined to find its prey, it could slither off in another direction and search the station. Han prepared himself for a long spukamas and mouse game. But instead, the beast snuffled and grunted, then slipped back into the water. It submerged with a splash, and was gone.

Chewbacca growled a question.

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“How should I know, pal?” Han said. “Long day of stalking people—maybe it’s just tired.”

*Maybe it’s just full.* But that fell into the category of things he wouldn’t allow himself to think about. Nothing could be done if Luke was dead. But as long as there was even a chance that the kid was still alive, Han had to push forward.

Once they were sure the creature wasn’t coming back, Chewbacca and Han joined R2-D2 before a large monitor. The screen lit with a map of the city. *If* the droid had programmed the tracker correctly, *if* it hadn’t malfunctioned in the creature’s gullet, *if* the beast returned to his feeding ground, *if* Luke was still alive...

There were a lot of ifs. But Han was a gambler; ifs were what made life fun.

“Come on, you blasted beast,” he muttered. “Take us home.”

They waited for the tracker’s blinking light to appear on the screen.

They waited a long, painful moment. And another.

“I see it!” Han shouted as a small green light appeared and inched slowly across the map. “The overgrown slug’s showing us exactly where to go!”

He gave R2-D2 a dome-rattling slap on the back.

Chewbacca released a worried growl, tracing a furry paw across the screen. Han winced. “You’re right; it’s headed for the sea.” He’d seen some Roamer-6 breath masks in the supply room when they were rummaging for spare parts for the tracking device. It was the same model they carried on the *Falcon*, because unlike most rebreathers, it could fit a Wookiee. Breathing underwater would be the easy part. Sure, they could swim down in search of the creature’s lair—but it was hard to fight underwater, and their blasters would be useless. So how were they supposed to rescue Luke without becoming meals themselves?

If only there was some way to be on equal footing with the creature. Some way to turn the water to their advantage...



## STAR WARS: Firefight

“That’s it!” Han shouted suddenly as a rough plan began to coalesce. Chewbacca barked excitedly. Han shook his head. “No time to explain. I’ll tell you on the way.” He turned to the astromech droid. “Stay here and ready the ships. Chewie and I will be back soon—and so will Luke. We’re finally blasting off this rock. *All* of us.”

## Chapter Twelve

Luke guided the lightsaber along the seam of flesh, cauterizing the edge. “I think that does it,” he said, surveying their work. He and Div had sliced the beast open and crafted a large, lumpy, misshapen bubble out of its massive stomach cavern. The result was a semitranslucent container with just enough space for two humans. If they were lucky, it would keep the air in and the water out. Luke had done most of the work, as he wasn’t about to let Div take the lightsaber again. But Div hadn’t asked. He’d seemed content to stand by as Luke sliced and diced the creature, helping Luke stretch and press the flesh into a shape they could use.

Luke still didn’t trust the man. But he was grateful for the help.

“You ready?” he asked.

“Always,” Div said.

They climbed into the bubble and, using the heat of the lightsaber to melt the edges together, sealed themselves inside. Now there was no time to spare. The bubble held a finite amount of air. Once it was gone, they were dead.

They had managed to shape the slimy flesh around their legs, giving them the flexibility to propel themselves forward. It might even allow them to steer. But they had no idea whether they’d

have enough buoyancy to keep the bubble from sinking once it was out in the open sea. This was their last option. That didn't make it a good one.

Nodding at Div, Luke began to scrabble his feet against the cave rock, pushing them forward into the pool of water. They tipped over the edge with a splash. Luke braced himself, waiting for water to blow through the seams of the bubble, flooding them before they could even begin. But the membrane held. A mild current carried them slowly through the tunnel of water, drawing them into the sea. Luke breathed shallowly, trying not to worry about how much air they had left. He had survived the journey down from the surface. They had no reason to believe there wouldn't be enough air to make it in the opposite direction.

The bubble slowly rose toward the surface. Schools of orange-and-gray-striped fish skittered out of the way. They floated past rocky outcroppings of rainbow-colored corals, spindly branches alive with tiny creatures. Long tendrils of seaweed swayed with the current; bright eyes gleamed from behind the undulating green curtain.

Gradually, the water took on a dim glow. They were nearing the surface.

*This is actually going to work*, Luke thought.

That was before a shadow passed over them like a storm cloud. A well of dread pooling in the pit of his stomach, Luke looked up. He gasped.

It was another of the beasts. It glided through the water, its thick tentacles trailing behind it. Luke gripped his lightsaber.

"Are you insane?" Div hissed. "You slice this thing open, we drown."

"That thing comes for us, we're dead anyway," Luke shot back, though he knew that Div was right. He holstered the weapon. "What should we do?"

But Div, who'd been acting like he had all the answers, was silent.

"Maybe it won't see us," Luke said.

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"Maybe we should paddle back to the cave," Div suggested.

"Back?" Luke exclaimed. "But we're so close!"

"We can't fight. We can't hide. What do you want to do?" Div sighed. "Sometimes you have to play it safe."

Sometimes these days, it felt like playing it safe was all Luke ever did. But maybe Div was right. What other option did they have?

"Now," Div urged him, "before that *thing* realizes we're here. We can always try again."

They began paddling back toward the mouth of the cave. But the bubble was too buoyant, and the current too strong. No matter what they did, they kept floating up—toward the surface, toward the creature. "This isn't working," Luke said nervously, looking up at the underbelly of the beast. "And if it senses that we're here—"

"I think we may have bigger problems," Div said quietly.

Luke looked away from the creature. His mouth dropped open.

The thick membrane of the bubble gave everything a fogged, shadowy look, turning the world into a collage of blurs melting into one another. But the shapes approaching them were clear enough. Another of the creatures, and another. On the ground, they had been fast but awkward. Underwater, they moved with a deadly grace, tentacles cutting through the sea as they glided toward their prey. Luke glanced behind them; more of the creatures were swarming. There had to be at least ten of them, and in the distance, he spotted more on the way.

They were surrounded.

## Chapter Thirteen

What'd I tell you?" Han said. "The answer to our prayers!"

Chewbacca looked dubiously at the nest of aiwhas, then back at Han. He barked a question.

"Easy," Han said confidently. "We just...ride them."

Chewbacca barked again.

"Well, I don't know *how* we're going to do it," Han said irritably. "But standing around *whining* about it isn't going to help." And it wasn't going to get Luke back. The aiwhas were their best shot, maybe their only shot. Han knew that the creatures had been tamed by the Kaminoans. Maybe since the city had been abandoned, they'd reverted to their wild origins, but any animal that had once allowed itself to be ridden would allow it again—assuming Han and Chewbacca could find a way to climb up on their backs.

Han looked up at the aiwha nest—way up.

The huge birdlike lizards swooped in wide circles around the spired building. Their wingspread was more than twice Han's height. And the muscles rippling in their massive tails looked powerful enough to knock the top off a building.

"Just like riding a bantha," Han said. "Not a problem."

Chewbacca didn't look convinced.

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“We just need to find a way up there,” Han mused.

Chewbacca growled a sharp retort.

“What do you mean you don’t think that’s our biggest problem?” Han asked. “What else do you—*whoaaaaaa!*” An aiwha, flying low, knocked him off his feet. “Not again,” Han muttered, rubbing the new lump on his forehead. He looked up, watching the aiwha’s tough underbelly as it circled through the air.

Maybe another little sky ride was exactly what he needed. It would sure beat climbing up to the nest. Han shouted and waved, trying to lure the aiwha closer. It wheeled low, crying out, and soon others joined it, all circling toward Han.

Now that they were closer, Han could see that only a couple of the creatures still had their harnesses. Han waited for his opening. Then with one last glance back at Chewbacca, Han reached up and clamped a hand around an aiwha’s harness. It squawked in consternation, but Han held tightly as the ground dropped out beneath him. Now he was dangling in midair on the strength of the grip in his left hand.

The aiwha’s hide was too leathery to offer any kind of handhold, but if he could wedge his hand into the niche between the wing and the torso, it was just possible he could pull himself onto the creature’s back. He strained to pull himself up the creature’s body, but there was no way. The torso was too wide, and he had no leverage. He needed some momentum, to give him an extra push.

Han began swinging his legs through the air, sweeping them rhythmically back and forth until his body swayed like a pendulum beneath the aiwha. He still didn’t have the arm span to reach the wing—not as long as he was holding on to the harness. But there was something else he could try.

He swung back and forth as hard as he could. This had to be timed exactly right. If he missed, he would drop to the ground, which was now at least thirty meters below. But he had to at least

*try*. “You better thank me for this one, kid,” Han muttered, and—giving himself one last hard swing—let go.

For a terrifying, exhilarating moment, he was flying free. He stretched out his arms, straining toward the aiwha’s wing. His fingertips caught hold of the edge, then slipped. He was going to fall.

Han scrabbled for purchase, clinging to the aiwha. Thrown off balance, the flying lizard tipped to the right, then flapped hard, trying to disengage its unwelcome visitor. Han clenched the wing as tightly as he could. Then, his biceps bulging with the strain, he pulled himself up so that his chest was level with the wing.

He curled his legs up to his chest and walked his feet up the side of the aiwha until he was nearly standing on the wing. Then it was a simple matter of flattening himself against the aiwha and carefully shinnying his way up the torso until he found himself squarely on the creature’s back. It bucked angrily, its smooth flight transformed into a jerky, teeth-clattering mess of bumps and jolts. Han tried looping his legs through the creature’s harness, but it had been built for a Kaminoan. So he wrapped his arms around its thick neck, squeezing tightly as the creature plunged into a perilous dive.

Han laced his fingers together and pulled gently against the aiwha’s neck. It was a strategy he’d learned from breaking in wild rontos back on Corellia. And just like a ronto, the aiwha slowly relaxed into his command. “Thatta girl,” Han said softly, patting the aiwha’s long neck as it leveled out of its dive. He experimented with his control over the creature, tugging it gently to starboard, encouraging it to ascend steeply, then taking it into a shallow, controlled dive. He discovered that a quick, light kick to its haunches made the creature speed up, while pulling back on its shoulders slowed it down again. Han shook his head, grinning. “No such thing as a ship I can’t fly.”

Once he was sure of his control over the aiwha, he swung it toward the ground, heading straight for Chewbacca. They buzzed

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the Wookiee, skimming the air just over his head. Han waved cockily at his surprised friend. “What’d I tell you?” he shouted and brought the aiwha in for a landing a few meters away from the Wookiee. “Well, what are you waiting for?” he asked, slapping the aiwha’s backside. “Hop on!”

Once they’d managed one aiwha, it was far simpler to capture a second one. Han and Chewbacca just rode the tamed lizard up to the nest. Chewbacca was easily able to hop off and land on the back of a second one. That aiwha fell into line just as quickly as the first.

They flew swiftly toward the edge of the city, following the flashing signal of the homing beacon on the handheld portable monitor in Han’s hand. As they approached the water, Han slipped on his breath mask. Chewbacca did the same. The masks made it difficult to talk—and once they were underwater, difficult would become impossible. But Han and Chewbacca understood each other. When they’d reached the beast’s underwater lair, there wouldn’t be many options to discuss. Their blasters would be useless. They’d managed to scrounge a couple of concussion grenades from the research station supplies, but there was no telling if they were still functional. This was the kind of mission with a limited number of possible outcomes.

They would run, or they would fight.

They would fail, or they would succeed.

When they found Luke, he would be alive. Or he wouldn’t.

The aiwhas plunged beneath the water. Han stiffened against the icy blast. He hadn’t expected the cold. His muscles cramped up, but he held tightly to the aiwha, forcing it deeper and deeper into the sea.

The signal was closer, but the beast was on the move. Han slowed the aiwha as they drew near. The distant surface cast little light, but swarms of Kaminoan electro-eels gave the underwater world a dim glow. Han spotted the mouth of a cave in the distance and wondered if Luke was inside. But the signal had



moved a half kilometer to the east, and Han decided to pursue that first. Chewbacca followed.

Suddenly, they both stopped cold. The aiwhas flung their wings out to halt their glide through the water, bucking and wriggling in fear. They had found the beast—and about twenty of the beast's closest friends.

And floating in the center of the ring of monsters: a large translucent bubble. Han narrowed his eyes, unable to believe what he was seeing. Two shadowy human figures inside the bubble. One lit by the telltale blue glow of a Jedi lightsaber.

Luke was alive—and he was in trouble.

Han didn't hesitate. He forced the balking aiwha forward, faster and faster. The beasts were advancing on Luke. Han had only one weapon at his disposal, and now was the time to use it. He fired a concussion grenade directly at the beast farthest from Luke. It detonated on impact. The creature—and the two beasts on either side of it—exploded in a storm of frothing water and thick, viscous red fluid. Han had been hoping the explosion would frighten the creatures away. But the scent of blood drove them into a fury. They set upon the drifting pieces of flesh in a squall of wriggling tentacles and gnashing teeth.

Luke used the lightsaber to slit open the skin of the bubble. He swam furiously toward Han, who did his best to calm the panicky aiwha before it decided Luke would make good comfort food. The enemy pilot swam after Luke, but Han waved his hands. He'd brought along only one extra breath mask and air tank. Luke shook his head, pointing at the pilot, then at Chewbacca's aiwha, making his meaning clear. He wasn't going to the surface unless the other pilot came along.

He took the mask Han handed him and held it over his mouth for a moment, then passed it to the other pilot, who took a breath and passed it back to Luke. Han got the idea. And there was no time to argue. They were running out of air. Soon the beasts would be done feasting on carrion and start looking for fresh blood. Han shrugged and directed the enemy pilot to

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Chewbacca's aiwha. Luke forced him to take the mask. Han drew in a deep breath and handed his own mask to Luke. If the aiwha swam fast enough, they could make it back to the surface, switching off every few seconds.

He urged the aiwha to ascend, feeling like his lungs would burst. Soon Luke handed the breather back. They swapped it back and forth, streaking toward the surface. Han glanced back once, to see the horde of beasts swimming after them. He decided not to look again. They sped through the water, schools of tiny fish darting away from the aiwha's massive wings.

Breaking through the surface was like waking from a nightmare. Even the storm-darkened Kamino skies were a welcome change from the unrelieved darkness of the sea. Han sucked in a deep, cleansing breath of fresh air and directed the aiwha back toward the research station. They were finally on their way home.

"You okay, kid?" Han asked as they glided through the city.

"I don't understand," Luke said, gripping the aiwha tightly. "How did you find us?"

"What makes you think I was looking for you?" Han joked. "Maybe Chewie and I just felt like doing some fishing."

"You saved my life," Luke said, craning forward in an attempt to meet Han's eye.

"I suggest you hang on," Han grinned as they dived toward the surface of the planet. The research station was only a hundred meters away. "Pretty soon we'll be—"

"*Duck!*" Luke shouted, flattening Han against the aiwha. A blast of laserfire screamed past them. The aiwha shrieked as another blast scorched its tail. A row of Imperial assault tanks had assembled in front of the research station. Each was equipped with a rotating laser cannon and dual missile launchers—all of which were aimed at Han and Luke.

A concussion grenade dropped out of the sky, blowing one of the tanks to bits. A hailstorm of flak erupted from the wreckage. Han glanced up at Chewie, who'd tossed the grenade.

## **STAR WARS: Firefight**

“Thanks, pal!” he shouted. Chewbacca roared back, then pulled out his blaster and began firing at the tanks.

Han and Luke did the same, but it was useless; the tanks’ deflector shields could easily bear the blasterfire. And pretty soon, one of the Imperial missiles would score a direct hit.

“Can’t this thing fly any higher?” Luke shouted. “We have to get away!”

“I’m working on it!” Han said irritably, trying to come up with a better option. They could fly away on the aiwhas, all right, but then what? The ships they needed were inside the research station—which meant that if they ever wanted to go home, they had to find a way past those tanks.

And they had to do it before the tanks blew them out of the sky.

## Chapter Fourteen

Luke hunched down, firing his blaster at the tanks as Han steered the aiwha. They wheeled in circles, trying to avoid the enemy fire. Rain pelted their faces. Gusts of wind buffeted them from side to side. A missile screamed past, too close for comfort. The aiwha bucked. Luke lost his grip on the slippery hide. He lurched forward, sliding down the creature's back.

Han seized his wrist, hauling him upright. "Hold on tight, kid," he shouted, trying to make himself heard over the rushing wind. "This is gonna be bumpy!"

They zigzagged through the streams of laserfire, riding the updraft higher and higher. The atmosphere thinned. Bolts of lightning sizzled, uncomfortably close. But gradually the noise of battle faded, and the laserfire tapered off. As the ground disappeared beneath them, Luke realized they were hidden in the dense cloud cover.

Chewbacca followed their lead, guiding his aiwha up to Han's level. Soon they were flying side by side.

"That blasted scientist must have tipped them off," Han muttered. "I knew he was trouble."

Chewbacca's aiwha swooped in close enough that they could hear Div shouting. "What now?" he called.

## STAR WARS: Firefight

"Ships are waiting for us in that station," Han shouted back. "We have to go back."

"We'll never make it past the tanks!" Luke pointed out. "They have too much firepower."

Han craned his neck around to grin at Luke. "You're exactly right. That's it."

"What's it?" Luke asked, confused.

"We'll give them something else to fire at," Han said. He waved at Chewbacca. "Come on!"

Luke held on more tightly as the aiwha dived through the clouds. The ground screamed toward them. The Imperial tanks charged up their weapons and began firing again. Han hooted in triumph. "That's right, boys!" he shouted, shaking a fist at the tanks. "Come and get us!"

The aiwha veered sharply to the right, heading away from the research station. "Han, what are you doing?" Luke shouted. "We're going the wrong way!"

Han ignored him and pushed the aiwha faster. They rode low over the city, banking and weaving to avoid the laserfire. Luke quickly realized they were backtracking, heading to the point where they'd come ashore. They soon approached the sea. The water rippled and churned, spitting up froth along the shore. Han took the aiwha lower and lower, until they were nearly skimming the surface. "What are you doing?" Luke asked again, peering nervously into the dark water.

"See those maneuvering fins on the tanks?" Han asked as they glided back and forth across the water, about ten meters over on the sea. "Those tanks are amphibious. They want us, they're going to have to follow us. And there's a nasty surprise waiting if they do."

He was right—at least about the first part. The tanks didn't even pause as they reached the landing platform. Mechanical fins extended like wings, and repulsorlifts retracted as the tanks shifted to a jet propulsion system. The armored vehicles rolled off the ramp at the platform's end and into the water, their jets

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keeping them afloat. A constant stream of laserfire burst from the water. The aiwha screamed as a blast scalded its hind legs. The creature lurched in the air, its wings flapping unevenly. Luke tried not to think about what would happen if it took another hit. They were close enough to the water that the fall wouldn't kill them. But he wasn't worried about the fall. He was worried about what lay beneath.

Except they weren't beneath, not anymore. The water around the tanks began to churn. Black tentacles emerged from the waves, slapping against the durasteel hulls. Within seconds, the sea came alive with wriggling bodies, tentacles and jaws and iridescent armored flanks glittering in the laser light. The tanks stopped firing at the aiwhas. Luke stared down in horror as they lowered their laser cannons toward the water, trying to put the sea monsters down. But it was no use. One missile slammed into another tank, tearing a hole through its hull. The tank filled with water and began to sink. Faint screams drifted up from the sea.

Han had lost his smile. He and Luke watched somberly as the creatures swarmed in a frenzy. There couldn't have been more than twenty of them, but it seemed like hundreds. The tanks tried to escape, but they were surrounded. Tentacles wrapped around missile launchers, maneuvering fins, shield generators—dragging the tanks down. And slowly but surely, they sank beneath the surface. One after another, they disappeared into the choppy sea, until nothing was left of them but a few rising bubbles and a single tentacle slithering into the deep.

Then the sea was empty. The tanks were gone.

And beneath the surface, the beasts fed.

"We had no choice," Luke said quietly.

"We had no choice," Han repeated, his voice flat. He turned the aiwha toward the research station without another word. Neither of them looked back.

It took only a few minutes to return to the center of the city. Luke tipped his head toward the sky, letting frigid rain stream down his face. Storm clouds swirled overhead. Thunder boomed

## STAR WARS: Firefight

so loudly it felt like the storm was right on top of them. The rumbling grew louder, and a blinding flash of light pierced the clouds. *That wasn't lightning*, Luke thought.

"Han, incoming at three o'clock!" he shouted as a laser bolt went screaming past. Just beneath them, a building exploded, slamming them with a powerful shock wave.

Chewbacca and Div barely avoided the leaping flames.

"Got to get this bird on the ground," Han cried as a squadron of TIE fighters burst through the clouds. He drove the aiwha forward until the research station came into sight; then he launched them into a precariously steep dive. All around them, explosions rattled the city. The TIE fighters fanned out, swooping shockingly close to the ground. Luke had faced the ships plenty of times before, but never without the protection of his own X-wing. Now, hurtling through the air completely exposed, he shuddered at the swarm of fighters. They weren't just ships; they were death machines.

"Quit dreaming, kid, and prepare to jump," Han shouted, bringing the aiwha in for a landing. "We have to get in and out of that station before the Empire blows it away."

## Chapter Fifteen

The ships are in the far north wing!" Han shouted, leaping off the aiwha the moment its clawed paws touched the ground. He ran toward the building. Luke and the Wookiee followed close behind him, with Div bringing up the rear. "Follow me!"

"Hurry," Div yelled, "before—" A crack of thunder drowned him out. Div glanced up, expecting to see another storm swirling overhead. But the clouds had been replaced by a swarm of TIE fighters. "Incoming!" Div shouted, diving for cover as laserfire rained down on them. He shoved Luke out of the way just as the wall of a building exploded outward, showering the streets with a storm of flak.

The ground shook and shuddered as they raced toward the research station. Streaks of laserfire lit the sky. The air grew thick with smoke and ash. Div choked on the acrid stench of fire. He knew what would happen next. The Imperials would raze the city. Their attack would flatten the buildings and turn the remaining heaps of durasteel into an inferno. And then, when the ground was flat and lifeless, when there was nothing left—no motion, no sound, no hope—they would depart to wreak their destruction on another corner of the galaxy. They would leave behind nothing but corpses.



## STAR WARS: Firefight

Broken bodies, like the bodies of his parents, their unseeing eyes clouded with blood.

Twisted shards of durasteel, like the smoldering remnants of the safe house, the last place he'd seen Trevor, before the Empire arrived.

And once again, they would leave him alive, alone. Surrounded by death. *Because that's my job, isn't it?* he thought wryly, refusing to allow the flood of self-pity. *I live, while all those around me die.*

*The galaxy needs you,* they had said, sacrificing themselves so that he could survive.

*You are our hope.*

But that hope had been crushed. Flattened, just like everything else.

*No,* he thought, furious with himself. This wasn't the time to lose oneself in memories. He was no one's salvation. And that boy, that *Lune*, no longer existed. He was Div now, nothing more. Lune was as dead as his parents, as dead as his adopted brother, as dead as all that *special, extraordinary potential* that so many had wasted their lives to protect.

*Dead as I'm going to be if I don't snap out of it,* Div thought irritably. They had reached the research station, and he threw himself inside, along with Luke, Han, and Chewbacca, slamming the door behind them. They pounded down the corridors toward the north docking bay. The walls rattled as laserfire strafed the roof. The building was taking a lot of hits, too many. "Won't be easy to take off in this," Div muttered.

"Easy's boring," Han shot back.

A chunk of the ceiling collapsed. Div and Han dived out of the way just as a heavy rock of duracrete crashed between them. "T'll take boring," Div muttered.

But that wasn't an option.

In minutes, they made it to the docking bay, where the astromech droid waited beside three dilapidated ships.

## Alex Wheeler

“Good job, Artoo!” Luke exclaimed, hurrying toward the ship on the far right, a rusted Imperial Howlrunner with scorch marks along its fixed wings.

“The more ships, the more firepower,” Han said, “so...”

“Agreed,” Div said brusquely. Han was right; they needed as many ships on their side as possible. But no matter what, Div wouldn’t have trusted anyone’s piloting skills but his own. He chose the other Howlrunner, on the left, while Han and the Wookiee piled into the ARC-170 starfighter.

Han began to power up his ship. Luke’s engines were hot and ready to go. But Div took an extra moment to inspect the exterior of his Howlrunner, making sure there was no obvious damage or hull breach; he even found a replacement for his defunct weapon in an inside compartment—a rusty but operational blaster. Maybe Luke and Han had trusted their droid to prepare the ships, but Div trusted only himself. It was how he had stayed alive for so long.

“Stop right there!” The feeble command came from a thin, wispy Kaminoan in the entryway of the docking bay. He wobbled on spindly legs and clenched a thin, tattered lab coat around his shivering body. “You’re supposed to be dead! I told those Imperials to take care of you!” he shouted, raising a blaster. “I won’t let you destroy my experiment!”

“No one wants to destroy your experiment!” Div shouted. “We just want to leave here!” He ducked as the Kaminoan fired a burst of laserfire at him. The shot went wild, and the scientist stumbled backward with the unexpected recoil. The laserfire ricocheted off Div’s ship, scoring a shallow gash to the hull. “I don’t want to kill you,” Div said, drawing his own weapon. “But I’m *not* going to let you damage this ship.”

The scientist was insane; that was obvious. But he was a madman with a blaster. Div aimed his own weapon. It was useless, but the Kaminoan didn’t know that. He had the scientist in his sights. “Back off,” he called out. “Let me take off, and I’ll leave you here in peace.”

## STAR WARS: Firefight

*This is risky.* Div thought. *Too risky.* Normally, he would have shot him. It would have been the smart move. But that wasn't an option this time. "I'm just going to get on the ship now," he said as he backed toward the Howlrunner, his eyes never leaving the crazed Kaminoan. "And you just—"

Another stream of laserfire shot toward him, this time hitting closer to the mark.

Luke's and Han's ships lifted off the ground. If he didn't move soon, he'd be left behind. "Enough!" he shouted, and squeezed the trigger, purely on instinct. To his surprise, blue-green laserfire spurted from the blaster and slammed into the wall just over the Kaminoan's head. A chunk of duracrete slammed into his shoulder, knocking him to the ground. Div lunged for his ship. Within seconds, he had powered it up and lifted off the ground.

*I missed,* he told himself. *Maybe the weapon was still faulty after all. It happens.*

But it never happened, not to Div. He'd missed on purpose, saving the life of an enemy. He'd tried hard to rid himself of weakness, of the remaining shreds of mercy and doubt that made life so dangerous. Once again, he'd failed.

Div piloted the ship through the exit of the docking bay. The sky swarmed with TIE fighters. Laserfire blasted by, shattering against the Howlrunner's defensive shields. The ship could take a few seconds of this kind of pummeling, but no more. He had to make it into open air if he wanted to fight back. Div accelerated, pushing the ship as fast as it could go. Behind him, there was a thunderous crash, as if the sky had split open. He glanced back, just in time to see the research station erupt in flame. The Kaminoan scientist and all evidence of his precious experiment were gone forever.

Div forced his attention away from the ground and up to the sky. He was going to have to fight his way past the TIE fighters and out of the atmosphere, or he'd end up just like the scientist: blasted into oblivion.

## Chapter Sixteen

***P**ull up.*

*Pull up.*

*PULL UP!*

The thought began as a dim echo in the back of Luke's brain, but within seconds it swelled to a roar. He obeyed the instinct, yanking the controls back hard. The Howlrunner rose in a precarious climb through dense clouds. A TIE fighter screamed past, bare meters beneath him. Flying nearly blind in the storm, Luke hadn't even seen it coming. If something hadn't inspired his change in direction, the two ships would have collided.

Luke let out a thin, shuddering sigh, forcing himself to concentrate. TIE fighters darted in and out of the clouds, sparking the frequent bolts of lightning. The electrical storm was disrupting his radar and jamming the comms. He could only hope the Empire's pilots were similarly disoriented.

Rain slapped at the ship. Winds buffeted him from side to side. The Howlrunner was an Imperial ship, and unlike the X-wings, it had a fixed-wing design, along with laser cannons that were weaker than what he was used to. On the plus side, he could push it faster than an X-wing, and its narrow profile made

## STAR WARS: Firefight

it a difficult target. But in this weather, everything was a difficult target.

*Focus*, Luke told himself. Without radar, without a clear line of sight, he had little to go on but his instincts.

And the Force.

Luke dived sharply.

A laser bolt rocketed past. He turned his vehicle and backtracked its trajectory, tearing after the TIE fighter. It spiraled up through the clouds. Luke stayed close on its tail, struggling to keep the Imperial in his sights. The fighter looped to starboard, then climbed sharply to ten thousand meters and disappeared into the gray mist. Luke plunged after it, scanning the horizon for the flicker of light that would give it away. Nothing but cloud and rain—and then a forked bolt of orange lightning flashed across the sky.

*There!*

Luke squeezed the trigger. A laser bolt sliced through the clouds, straight for the Imperial. A fireball lit the night.

But before he could celebrate, he spotted something out of the corner of his eye. Clouds swirling, as if a huge object was tearing through them. Like a ship.

Luke jerked hard on the controls, executing a gut-dropping pivot so he was facing the oncoming ship. He readied his weapons and—

*No!*

Something made him hesitate.

He waited, knowing that the other ship was about to have a clear shot. Luke tightened his grip on the weapons trigger, ready to fire at the first sign of trouble.

The vessel emerged from the clouds. It was another Howlrunner. Luke had almost fired on Div.

*But why didn't he fire at me?* Luke wondered. In the murky skies, it would have been just as easy for Div to mistake Luke's ship for a TIE fighter. Somehow he'd known to hold back.

## Alex Wheeler

*Maybe he's as good a pilot as he says,* Luke thought grudgingly. *Lucky for me.*

Div's ship peeled off from its trajectory and banked shallowly to port. It shot off two short bursts of laserfire, though no enemy targets were in range.

*It's a signal,* Luke thought. *He wants me to follow him.*

All he had left were his instincts, and his instincts were telling him to trust Div.

So he did.

Skimming so low over the city that the belly of his starfighter nearly toppled the durasteel spires, Han watched Div and Luke break through the clouds overhead. They ambushed three TIE fighters running recon over the station, picking off the enemy one by one as their ships danced and weaved through a barrage of laserfire. It wasn't just that they were remarkable pilots—it was the way they worked together. With the comms out, they were all on their own, or should have been. But even from where Han was, he could tell that Luke and Div were functioning as a team, one anticipating the other's move almost before it happened.

*Good thing that guy's on our side,* Han thought.

*At least for the moment.*

Chewbacca, wedged into the copilot cockpit a few feet behind Han, barked a warning. But Han already saw them: two TIEs, four and seven o'clock. Both hot on their tail. "I see 'em, Chewie," Han said, upping the fore thrusters. He fired a short burst from the tail guns, but the fighters evaded him easily. He had to maneuver behind them, turn the chase around—which meant he needed to shake them or outrun them. "Let's see how fast she can go," he muttered, pushing hard on the accelerator.

They shot forward, the g-forces flattening them against the seats. But the TIE fighters kept pace with ease. A stream of laserfire sizzled past his cockpit window. Han banked sharply to port as they fired again. A bolt glanced off his wing.

## STAR WARS: Firefight

“Blast!” Han cursed, dipping the nose of the ship toward the ground. If he couldn’t outpace them, he would have to outfly them.

As the ship lost altitude, the city rose around him. Chewbacca issued an alarmed growl. “I know what I’m doing,” Han snapped.

Pushing the ship to breakneck speed, he weaved through the empty Kaminoan streets, guiding the ship down winding boulevards. The TIEs were forced to follow single file. Han whipped around a hairpin turn and ducked beneath a bridge, waves lapping at the belly of the ship. The lead Imperial took a shot, but it went wild, slamming into the side of a building. The laser bolt knocked loose a shower of duracrete chunks, which rained down on the slower of the TIEs like an asteroid field.

Han heard the explosion as the ship crashed to the ground, but he couldn’t spare a look back.

The remaining Imperial was still matching him turn for turn, move for move. Han knew he could climb to a higher altitude and try to get the jump on the TIE fighter in open sky—but churning with storm clouds and crowded with enemy craft, the skies were hardly open. At least down here he knew what he was dealing with.

He swept through the city, searching for just the right spot. Finally, he veered around a building to find exactly what he’d been looking for: a long, narrow straightaway ending in a monolithic slab of duracrete. Han gunned the engine and headed straight for it.

*I know what I’m doing*, he reminded himself, ignoring Chewbacca’s increasingly loud protests.

The TIE fighter stayed on his tail, as he knew it would. “Just a little farther,” he murmured. “A little closer.”

The building loomed before them, too massive and too close in the cockpit window.

## Alex Wheeler

*Now!* Han yanked the controls, forcing the ship into a ninety-degree climb. The ship roared up the side of the building. Han allowed himself a single glance back.

The TIE fighter was almost as fast, but not nearly so lucky. Instead of pulling up, it veered around the building, avoiding it by less than a meter. It cleared the structure—but not the thick, tall levee holding back the sea behind it.

As Han had flown to the sea on the aiwhas, he'd passed this way and been taken by surprise by the levee that appeared out of nowhere, marking the edge of the city. The aiwhas had known enough to avoid it; the TIE fighter crashed right into it. The ship exploded, ripping a huge gash in the seawall. A flood of water gushed into the abandoned streets.

Han adjusted the angle of his climb and accelerated toward the edge of the atmosphere, noting out of the corner of his eye that Div and Luke had taken down the last of the enemy ships and were doing the same. Soon the air thinned out, the clouds faded away, and the cool, crisp glimmer of stars shimmered in the distance, glowing brightly in the vacuum. Han grinned as Kamino fell away behind him. Space was waiting.

And so were four more TIE fighters, holding a low orbit over the planet.

They opened fire.



## Chapter Seventeen

Luke increased power to the thrusters and accelerated through the atmosphere. The planet shrank beneath him, but he couldn't jump to hyperspace until he was safely out of range. And there were four TIE fighters blocking his path.

"Enemy fighter on your tail," Han reported through the comm.

"I see it!" Luke dropped into a corkscrew spiral. The TIE stayed close, hugging the same tight curves.

"Incoming!" Han shouted, too busy with two fighters of his own to lend a hand. Div was holding his own, pursuing a fighter with scorch marks lining its solar array wings. A trail of smoke streamed from its command pod.

Laserfire streaked toward Luke's ship. He deployed countermeasures and pulled a reverse-S maneuver, flipping his craft upside down and backtracking over the TIE fighter's head. He slipped into the Imperial's blind spot for just a moment, but it was all the time he needed. He locked in the target, squeezed the trigger. A blast of white-hot laserfire shot toward the TIE fighter.

It exploded. The solar array wings blew off and drifted into space.

## Alex Wheeler

*One down*, Luke thought, swooping around to join Han's fight.  
*Three to go.*

"Blast it!" Han slammed a fist on the control panel. He'd never be used to flying this piece of junk. It might have been more maneuverable than the *Falcon*, and its parts might have been in better working order, but it wasn't *his* ship. The *Falcon* felt like a part of his body; it responded almost before he made a move. The ARC-170 was just a machine. And, as far as Han was concerned, not a very good one.

Chewbacca growled a warning.

"I see it, I see it," Han muttered, peeling off from his trajectory as a fireball whizzed past. A TIE zoomed up from below and unleashed another barrage of laserfire before he could steer out of the way. The ARC's shields bore most of the brunt, but a few bolts snuck through. The alert system went haywire, screaming of damage to the hyperdrive. Han cursed under his breath and slammed a fist into the controls again, silencing the alarm. He needed to focus on surviving the next moment, then the next.

"Think you can sneak up on me?" Han shouted, pushing the accelerator and hurtling past the closest of the TIE fighters. Activating the inertial damping system, then slamming the aft thrusters, he flipped the ARC end over end, reversing direction in a hairpin swivel that put him face to face with the shocked Imperial pilot. "Think again." Han waved at the Imperial, then pulled the trigger. One good thing about the ARC fighter: The laser cannon muzzle was designed to internally tilt the beam, offering a few more degrees of accuracy.

It was a direct hit.

The TIE's cockpit window shattered into a shower of transparisteel as the ship imploded. Caught by the shock wave, Han's ship lurched and shuddered, and he was nearly trapped in the blowback fire of the explosion. But he guided the ship safely

## STAR WARS: Firefight

out of range, already homing in on the second fighter. “Can’t believe that actually worked,” he muttered.

Chewbacca barked sharply.

“What are you worried about?” Han said. “Even without the *Falcon*, three of us can take two TIE fighters, easy.”

But then he glanced at the radar screen and answered his own question. Another enemy ship was drawing into range. A *larger* ship, shaped like a dagger.

Han shot Chewbacca a worried glance. Two TIE fighters was one thing. Two TIEs and a Star Destroyer was another altogether.

“You seeing what I’m seeing, kid?” Han asked through the comm.

Luke’s voice was steady. “Copy that, Han. I’m not giving up yet.”

As he spoke, the bank of turbolasers on the Star Destroyer’s starboard side swiveled toward his ship. And fired.

Div watched it all happen with a clarity he hadn’t experienced in a long, long time.

The laser bolt speeding toward Luke’s Howlrunner.

Luke, as if he’d expected the shot before it happened, was already taking evasive maneuvers, shifting hard to starboard and diving away from the incoming fire.

The TIE fighter easing into Luke’s blind spot, taking advantage of his momentary distraction. Preparing to fire.

Han was pinned down; Luke was focused on the Destroyer.

Div could watch his target go up in flames, return to his employer, and claim the reward money all for himself. Or he could act.

It was as if the ship had decided for him. Feeling as if he were watching himself from a great distance, Div rotated the vessel, coming up fast and shallow behind the TIE fighter. Just before the Imperial pilot could fire on Luke, Div launched a concussion missile.

## Alex Wheeler

Direct hit. The flimsy fighter exploded.

Div dodged and weaved through the flak, soaring over the wreckage—and straight into the Destroyer's line of fire. The Empire's cannon attack strafed his wings and blew out the shield generator.

A hail of laserfire lit up the cockpit. Alarms blared. Hits to the navigation, propulsion, targeting systems. Engine power overload. Port thrusters dead, starboard thrusters firing out of control.

The ship fell into a dizzying spin. The cockpit filled with smoke.

*All because I couldn't watch a Jedi die,* Div thought bitterly. *Not another one. Not again.*

He'd been weak once more; he'd given in to impulses that should have been long since destroyed. Maybe death was the punishment he deserved.

He waited for the Destroyer to deliver the final blow.

But before it could, a ship jumped out of hyperspace, a rusted Corellian clunker that wouldn't last five minutes against the Imperial onslaught. If it tried to attack the Star Destroyer, it would be a momentary distraction for the Empire's craft, nothing more, before they returned to the task of slaughtering Div and the rest of them.

If the freighter was an Imperial ally, then maybe it would take Div down first. He almost laughed: Imagine the galaxy's greatest pilot blown away by such a sad, misshapen bird. Either way, it didn't matter. Dead was dead, regardless of who dealt the blow.

Div shut his eyes and waited for someone to fire.

"Fire," Leia ordered, hoping that C-3PO had absorbed her quick tutorial on operating the quad laser cannons. Laserfire launched toward the Star Destroyer, scoring a direct hit on its shield generator dome. Leia quickly guided the *Millennium Falcon* out of the Destroyer's firing range and took a quick survey of the

situation. Three battered ships—one out of commission, two intact but taking heavy fire.

She tuned the comm to a Rebel frequency, hoping to pick up evidence that her friends were inside. As she did so, she accelerated and hurtled toward the remaining TIE fighter, which was lurking just beneath one of the strange ships, about to fire. Two quick blasts from the laser cannons blew it into debris.

“Took you long enough.” Han’s voice over the comm was as infuriatingly cocky as ever. Leia allowed herself a short sigh of relief. She’d worried she might never hear that voice again. “But what I want to know is who gave you permission to fly my ship?”

“Excuse me, Your Highness, but the Star Destroyer seems to be powering up its turbolasers again,” C-3PO relayed, sounding worried. “At this juncture, might it be wise if we considered perhaps—”

“Just *fire!*” Leia snapped.

“Tell me you didn’t let that tin can fool around with my laser cannons,” Han moaned.

Leia ignored him. Now that the final TIE fighter had been destroyed, she could concentrate on the Star Destroyer.

When Zev and Wedge had reported back to Yavin 4 with news of the failed mission, Commander Narra had been convinced that Han and Luke were lost. There had been no life signs in the Kaminoan city, no indication that they had survived the crash. But Leia had told herself that electrical storms in the atmosphere could have foiled their sensors—that Luke and Han *must* have survived.

Now that she had them back, she certainly wasn’t going to let a Star Destroyer take them away. And fortunately, she didn’t have to fight it alone.

“*Now,*” she said into the comm. Eight X-wings, three Y-wings, and a blockade runner emerged from behind the planet. They’d exited hyperdrive on the other side of Kamino, hiding in its shadow while Leia scouted the situation. Now they were ready to enter the fray.

## Alex Wheeler

The Rebels opened fire on the Star Destroyer. Laser bolts ricocheted across its bow, and a string of fireballs exploded along its starboard side. The *Millennium Falcon* led the charge, swooping low over the shield generator dome and unleashing a pair of proton torpedoes. The second hit was more than the dome could take. It cracked and exploded, leaving a large swath of the Destroyer's hull defenseless.

The X-wings took full advantage of the opportunity, peppering the ship with laserfire while Han and Luke concentrated their fire on the gravity well projectors—which, if overloaded, could take down the main reactor.

"Han, Luke, are your hyperdrives intact?" Leia asked through the comm. They needed to flee the system before the Star Destroyer released its squadron of TIE fighters.

"Negative," Han said. "But I can hold them off, give you time to get away."

"You're just full of dumb ideas, aren't you?" Leia snapped, trying to cover her panic. There was no way she was leaving this system without Han.

"We're not going anywhere without you," Luke said.

"Don't be stupid!" Han shouted. "You stick around here and none of us make it home."

Leia pressed her fingers against the comm as he spoke. She could feel the vibrations of his voice.

She forced a careless laugh. "You've always said your ship can—"

"Exactly, *my* ship," Han cut in, his voice tight. "And I'm telling you to keep her safe."

"Right now she's busy keeping *you* safe," Leia said, firing on the Destroyer again and again.

They might have enough firepower to take down the Star Destroyer...*might*. Or she might be leading her people to their last battle.

*I know what I have to do*, she thought, and flipped on the comm, preparing herself to give the order.

## STAR WARS: Firefight

But before she could act, the Star Destroyer made her decision for her. Apparently deciding that the Rebels *did* have enough firepower to take it down, perhaps because of orders, it suddenly made the jump to hyperspace.

The Rebels were alone.

Leia realized she'd been holding her breath. She let it out in a whoosh and massaged the muscles in her neck, all of them rock solid with tension. Then she smiled and flicked on the comm. "Well?" she asked Han. "Don't you want permission to come aboard?"

## Chapter Eighteen

C-3PO put his golden arms around R2-D2 and gave him a clanking hug. “I thought I’d never see you again, Artoo!”

They stood in the main hold of the *Millennium Falcon*, waiting for the jump to hyperspace. R2-D2 beeped feebly.

“What do you mean I’m squeezing too tight?” C-3PO asked, letting go.

R2-D2 whistled a long response.

“You told me so? What do you mean you told me so?”

The astromech droid beeped peevishly.

“I most certainly will *not* admit that you did the right thing by going on this mission,” C-3PO said.

R2-D2 whirled and chattered.

“Well, of *course* I’m glad you were able to save Master Luke,” C-3PO admitted. “But that doesn’t mean you were right to take all those crazy risks.” He crossed his arms. “I’m very disappointed in you, Artoo.”

The astromech droid beeped plaintively.

C-3PO shook his head firmly. “Oh, no. I assure you, I would *not* have done the same thing in your place.”

R2-D2 didn’t reply.



## STAR WARS: Firefight

"Believe whatever you want to believe, you bucket of bolts! I know how to take care of myself. And you would be smart to follow my example."

The astromech droid beeped, pointing its manipulator arm at C-3PO.

"Me?" C-3PO asked incredulously. "Follow *your* example? Do you want both of us to end up on the scrap heap? No, no, Artoo. I think it's best that from now on, you stay close to my side, for your own safety."

R2-D2 trilled a question.

"Yes, for your own safety," C-3PO snapped. "Why else would I want you around?" He clapped a hand on his counterpart's dome. "Now, let's clean you up. All that rain *can't* have been good for your circuitry."

C-3PO strutted out of the hold, and R2-D2 wheeled happily after him. It was good to be home.

Leia switched over to autopilot. "I'm waiting," she said, glancing back at Han.

"Waiting for me to take over?" Han said, sliding into the copilot seat beside her. "Don't worry, Your Highness, your wait is over."

Leia rolled her eyes. "*Waiting* for a thank-you."

"Thank-you?" Han asked incredulously. "What am I supposed to be thanking you for?"

Leia resisted the urge to frown. Barely. "For saving your life?" she prompted him. "For blasting those TIEs out of the sky?"

Han shrugged. "I had the situation under control."

"Under control?" Leia laughed. "Without my help, you would have been—"

"Help?" Han echoed. "*Help?* All *you* did, Your Worshipfulness, was get in *my* way. You're lucky you didn't get us all killed. Not to mention my ship!"

"What about *your* ship?" Leia asked tightly.

## Alex Wheeler

"A busted fuel line, dented warp vortex stabilizers, and a giant hole in the aft hydraulics." Han glared at her. "All because *you* had to fly her into a war zone."

"Silly me," Leia snapped. "Next time, I'll just stay away!"

"Good!"

Leia stood up. She was tempted to shove Han out of the copilot seat. Or out of an airlock. But instead, she turned her back on him.

"Where are you going?" Han asked, the anger suddenly gone from his voice.

"To find *Luke*," she said pointedly. "At least *he* knows how to be grateful."

Han flicked a hand, as if waving aside the idea that anyone could be better company than him. "Ah, I can be grateful."

Leia suppressed a smile. Han was so predictable. He couldn't stand the idea that anyone was better than him, at anything. Especially Luke. "Oh really?" she asked skeptically. "Go ahead, prove it."

"Thank...you," Han said slowly, as if the words caused him physical pain.

"For?"

"For gifting us all with your royal presence, Princess," he drawled. "For honoring us peasants with your majestic—"

"Oh, stow it, bantha brain." Leia gave up and headed out of the cockpit.

"Leia?" Han said when she was almost out.

She froze, refusing to look at him. "Yes?"

"That wasn't the *worst* flying I've ever seen," Han admitted. "And at least the ship's still in one piece."

It was a good thing she had her back to him, because against her will, her lips curved up in a small smile. "You're welcome."

Luke sat on one side of the freight loading room. Div sat on the other, his wrists tied with makeshift binders.

"Is this really necessary?" Div asked, lifting his bound wrists. "It's not like I can go anywhere, and you can't be worried I'll sabotage the ship. Not while I'm still on it."

"It's a precaution," Luke said.

"I saved your life," Div reminded him.

Luke nodded. "I won't forget that."

But not so long ago, he'd met another stranger who'd risked himself to protect the *Falcon* and its crew. That stranger had been welcomed into the Rebel Alliance, no questions asked. That stranger had betrayed them. Betrayed *Luke*.

They'd started asking questions.

"I also won't forget that you're only here because someone paid you to kill me," Luke said.

"If I'd wanted you dead, you'd be dead by now," Div pointed out. "I could have let the beast take you. Or the Kaminoan. Or the TIE fighters. Or—"

"I know." Luke felt a twinge of guilt. Div was right. He'd protected Luke, again and again, often at great cost to himself. His ship had nearly been destroyed by the Empire. If the *Falcon* hadn't shown up when it did, Div would surely be dead by now.

"Look, I have nothing against you," Div said. "It was a job, nothing more. And it's over now. Just drop me off at the nearest planet and you'll never see me again."

Luke shook his head. "We're not done with you yet."

"Hey, don't start with any nonsense about me joining your ridiculous Rebellion," Div said quickly. "We may have teamed up on Kamino, but that was just so we could get *off* Kamino. It doesn't mean I'm looking for permanent allies. I've learned my lesson about hopeless causes."

Luke was tempted to ask what he meant by that.

But X-7 had pretended that *he* was done with causes, too. He'd invented a tragic backstory to gain their sympathy. He'd let them *convince* him to join the Rebellion. They'd nearly begged him to stay, to fight by their side.

## Alex Wheeler

*Whatever he did to us, it's because we let him,* Luke thought, disgusted with himself. *Because I was too blind to see the danger.*

Luke had convinced himself that the Force wanted him to trust X-7. But the truth was *Luke* had wanted to trust him. He'd fooled himself. And for that, he had only himself to blame.

"We'll let you go...as soon as you tell us everything you know about the man who hired you." Luke kept his voice steady and free of emotion. Whatever guilt or hesitation he might be feeling, he wasn't about to let it interfere.

Div met his eyes, his own gaze steely. "Afraid I can't tell you that. Ratting out your employers tends to be bad for business."

"I know who it was," Luke said. "I just need you to tell me where to find him."

"Not going to happen."

Luke stood up. "Then I guess you'll be staying with us for a bit longer."

"You can't keep me here forever," Div said. "And you won't *make* me talk. You're not the Empire."

"You're going to help me," Luke said as he left the freight room and locked the door behind him. "One way or another."

He hated this. He, Han, and Leia had agreed: They would bring Div back to Yavin 4. But it still felt wrong to imprison the man. Luke pushed down the guilt. It was surprisingly easy. Maybe because there was another emotion roiling in him, a far stronger one.

Anger.

There was an icy certainty deep in his gut: X-7 was behind this. And X-7 wasn't going to stop until Luke was dead. Div might be their only chance of catching him.

Luke's fingers curled into a tight fist. He ground his knuckles into his palm. Just the thought of X-7 sent a hot flood of fury rushing through him. *Enough*, he thought. Enough always looking over his shoulder.

Enough of being hunted.

## STAR WARS: Firefight

With Div's help, he would track down X-7, whatever it took. Then he would end this, once and for all. This time, finally, *Luke* would be the hunter.

And X-7 would be his prey.











***Trapped***  
BY ALEX WHEELER





## Chapter One

*The prisoner refuses to cooperate. He leans back in his chair, smiles at his interrogator, lips sealed, confident that he will win out, that his will is indomitable. He is stubborn, cocky, defiant.*

*He is wrong.*

*Luke Skywalker sits down across from the prisoner, aiming a fierce, steady gaze at the man. "You will tell me what I need to know," Luke says in a low voice.*

*The prisoner shakes his head. But he is no match for Luke. No match for the power of a Jedi.*

*Luke clears his mind of distractions, focuses on the prisoner, on the answers he needs and the steely mind that contains them. "You will tell me what I need to know," he says again.*

*Dazed, the prisoner nods. "I will tell you what you need to know."*

*For so long, he has tried so hard—tried to connect to the Force, tried to bend it to his will, never understanding the true lesson of the Jedi.*

*Luke allows the Force to flow through him. It binds him to this man, to this cell, to everything and everyone in the galaxy. And now that he understands this, he can do anything. "You will tell me the name of your employer and where to find him," Luke says.*

*The prisoner nods again. "I will tell you the name of my employer and where to find him," he agrees. The Force twists his mind, draws the words out of him. "His name is—"*

## Alex Wheeler

“Luke!”

Luke’s eyes popped open. A sharp rapping at the door kept him from dropping back to sleep. He’d been dreaming about...well, *something*. *Something important*, he thought, the memory licking at the corners of his mind. But as he tried to reach for it, the door flew open, and Han Solo blew into the room. The last traces of the dream evaporated, like dew in the morning sun.

“Sweet dreams, kid?” Han asked with a mocking grin.

Luke just groaned, glancing at the clock. It was a little past four in the morning. He’d gone to sleep only a few hours before, after a long, frustrating evening of questioning their prisoner.

*Prisoner.* Luke winced at the word. The *prisoner* had saved Luke’s life on Kamino, more than once. He’d proven himself brave and honorable, a man of his word. He’d fought off a sea monster, shot down Imperial fighters, and wielded Luke’s lightsaber with more speed and grace than Luke could ever hope to achieve. Yet he’d refused to say where he had learned to fight with the Jedi weapon. Just as he’d refused to admit who had sent him to Kamino—who had hired him to follow the Rebels and shoot Luke Skywalker out of the sky.

He’d refused to give them anything but his name: Lune Divinian.

A stranger, a paid assassin, the key to tracking down the man determined to see Luke dead...and yet, after Kamino, Luke couldn’t help thinking of Div as a friend.

He climbed out of bed, shrugging off his doubts. Not long ago, he had befriended a mysterious stranger, a man who had also seemed brave and honorable, who had saved his life. And trusting the wrong man had almost killed him. Lesson learned: Trust could be dangerous. Unearned trust could be fatal.

“What do you want, Han?” Luke asked wearily. “It’s practically the middle of the night.”

“Hey, if you’d rather nap, we can tuck you back into your cradle and—”

“Han!” Luke snapped. “What is it?”

## STAR WARS: Trapped

“Nothing much,” Han said lightly. “Just thought you might want to know, our prisoner’s asking for you. Says he’s ready to make a deal.”

“I’m here. What’s the deal?” Luke asked. Div was locked in the brig, where he’d been since they had returned from Kamino a week before. The small cell wasn’t that much barer than Luke’s own room; like that sparse chamber, it had a thin mattress, a table, a chair, and little else. Luke could almost imagine he was in the Rebel barracks—if he ignored the lack of windows.

And the locked door.

Luke hated seeing Div like this, penned up like an animal.

Div kicked his legs up onto the flimsy mattress. He stretched out like he was lying on an Amfarian beach, luxuriating under the red sun. “The deal is, you let me go. Now. Or I escape and tell the Empire everything there is to know about this place, and your little alliance.” He clapped his hands together once, loudly. “End of the Rebellion, just like that.”

“You wouldn’t do that,” Luke said. He didn’t know why, but he was sure it was true.

“Wouldn’t I?”

They glared at each other. Luke looked away first. *This is the right thing*, he told himself. *It’s our only choice*. But it didn’t ring true. Yes, Div had valuable information. Yes, he’d proven himself an enemy of the Rebellion. But he’d had plenty of chances to kill Luke. He hadn’t.

And the anger on his face when they’d accused him of working for the Empire—that had been real.

“You knew we’d never agree to those terms,” Luke said.

“Maybe.”

“So why drag me out here in the middle of the night?” Luke asked, irritated.

Div slapped the worn mattress. “Couldn’t sleep. So why should you?”

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If it hadn't been the middle of the night, Luke might have laughed. "You don't need to make any deals," he said instead. They'd been over this ground before. "Just tell us what we want to know. The name of your employer, and where to find him. That's all. Then you can leave here to go do...whatever it is you do."

"You want me to talk, you're going to have to make me." Div didn't look too worried. Surely he knew that the Rebel Alliance wasn't like the Empire, that they would never resort to torture or interrogation droids. Or maybe he was just certain that no matter what happened he'd keep his secrets to himself.

Luke drummed his fingers against the hilt of his lightsaber. "What if I *could* make you?" he said slowly. "You're forgetting, I'm a Jedi."

"You have a lightsaber," Div said. "It doesn't make you a Jedi. Trust me."

"The Force can have a strong influence on the weak-minded."

"You think I have a weak mind?" Div grinned. "Go ahead. Try me."

If only he could. Luke could feel the power within him. Why couldn't he access it? No matter how hard he pushed himself, how hard he tried to connect with the Force, it eluded his grasp. His failure was more frustrating than ever. He felt like the solution was fluttering at the edges of his memory, like a half-remembered dream. But that was silly. He didn't know how to use the Force, had never known. Because Ben had died before he could teach Luke all he needed to know.

He felt a surge of anger at the thought of Darth Vader and his red lightsaber slicing through Obi-Wan's body like it was made of air.

"This is useless," he said, fury boiling beneath his words.

"Like I've been telling you."

*The anger is your true enemy.* The words just popped into his head. They made little sense, but he felt they were true.

## STAR WARS: Trapped

"I'm leaving," he said abruptly. The longer he stayed and the angrier he got, the bigger the chance he'd do something he would regret.

"Not so easy, this Jedi stuff, is it?" Div asked as Luke stepped out of the cell. He muttered something else under his breath, something Luke didn't quite catch. But it sounded almost like *I should know*.

In a dark corner of space, just beyond the Rebel defenses, a ship waited.

And inside the ship, three men.

Biding their time.

They had no names, not anymore. This was how the Dark Lord had wanted it. They no longer needed their own identities. They were servants of the Empire, nothing more. And they were on a mission.

At their signal, a fleet of TIE fighters swooped into the moon's thick atmosphere and opened fire on the Rebel scum. The sky lit with explosions and laserfire. Flaming shrapnel screamed through the clouds. The Rebels scrambled a squadron of X-wings, but the pathetic ships would be no match for the Imperial attack.

And if they were: No matter.

The attack was merely a distraction, a decoy.

Something to occupy the Rebels while a single, stealthy Imperial ship slid into the atmosphere and streaked toward the jungle. With the fireworks of battle blasting above, no one would notice the grey bullet of a ship or its slim trail of exhaust. No one would realize that the perimeter had been breached. No one would understand why, without warning or reason, the TIE fighters suddenly turned and fled.

No one would stop the three men from carrying out their dark mission.

*You will bring it to me, Lord Vader had commanded them. Do not fail.*

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They didn't intend to.

Div stretched out, struggling to get comfortable. At least they'd given him a mattress, so he didn't have to sleep on the floor. In fact, there was little to complain about. The room the Rebels had locked him in was relatively clean, with no borrrats nibbling at his toes as he slept. He was alone, safe from the snoring or sneak attacks of a hostile roommate. Food appeared regularly and was usually warm, sometimes even edible. As cells went, this one was nearly pleasant.

But it was still a cell.

It was still four walls and a locked door, caging him inside. And so it was still intolerable.

Div closed his eyes, drawing in slow, even breaths. It was important to sleep when he could. He had to stay sharp so that when his chance for escape came, he could seize it.

*Breaking out of a Rebel jail cell, Div thought wryly. Wonder what Trever would think of that.*

But he didn't have to wonder; he knew. His adopted brother would have been ashamed that Div had ended up there in the first place. No, not ashamed. Disgusted. Hired by an Imperial agent to kill a key member of the resistance? If Trever were here, he probably would have been the first to throw Div into a cell.

*Except that I have no proof that he was an Imperial agent,* Div told himself. Although he'd had his suspicions—and ignored them.

*And I wasn't hired to kill Luke. I was hired to face him in a fair fight, pilot to pilot, may the best man win,* Div thought. Even though the "fair fight" had been an ambush.

*Trever can't judge me anymore,* Div told himself. *He's dead.*

He had no answer to that. Trever was dead, just like everyone else he'd ever cared about. That was where standing up to the Empire landed you. If Div hadn't wised up, he'd be in an *Imperial* cell right then. And the Imperials didn't give you mattresses or hot food or showers. They gave you interrogation droids and firing squads.



## STAR WARS: Trapped

Div also told himself that he had good reasons for refusing to answer Luke's questions. Divulging information about an employer—no matter how little he had—was bad for business. But a small buried part of him knew that that cold, dangerous man had been an Imperial. And that if Div helped the Rebels track him down, there would be no mercy.

*Trever would want me to survive,* Div thought. *No matter what it took.*

He wasn't sure it was true. But Trever wasn't around to argue.

Div sat up. He'd heard something.

No, that wasn't quite right. He'd *felt* something. It was a not-quite-right feeling, like an icy puff of air against the back of his neck. Trusting his instincts, he leapt to his feet. As a child, he'd had a fine-tuned radar for impending danger. His Jedi teachers, Ry-Gaul and Garen Muln, had shown him how to detect disturbances in the Force, tiny fluctuations that meant darkness was near. Those skills were gone now, along with Ry-Gaul and Garen Muln, along with the boy he'd been, the one everyone thought could become a Jedi. But he still knew when it was time to run. Not that he could run, not through a locked durasteel door. But he jumped to his feet, assuming a fighting stance. When trouble showed its face, he would be ready.

But there were some things you couldn't fight.

A thick yellow gas wafted into the cell from beneath the door. Div pressed his shirt over his nose and mouth, taking quick, shallow breaths. The room filled with the gas. There was nowhere to hide and nothing he could do but inhale the foul, acrid smoke.

A fog swept across his brain, making him woozy. *Stay alert,* he ordered himself, wobbling on his feet. Red spots swam in front of his eyes. His limbs grew heavy, and his head lolled on his shoulders. *Must...not...breathe,* he thought, leaning against the wall, fighting to stay upright. But as the gas burned his throat and

## Alex Wheeler

lungs, his legs gave out beneath him. He slid to the floor, helpless.

An explosion shook the cell, and the door blew inward.

*Fight*, Div told himself. Two masked men stepped into the cell. *Run. Escape.*

But the fog filling his mind had turned to a thick, soupy black. As the masked men approached, his eyes slipped shut. His body went limp. His thoughts drifted away.

Div drifted away.

## Chapter Two

Sirens blared across the Rebel Base. Luke, Leia, and Han raced toward Div's cell. The door had been torn from its hinges. Han looked inside, preparing himself for the worst. But the cell was empty. Div was gone. "How'd he manage that?" Han wondered.

Behind him, R2-D2, Luke's little astromech droid, beeped urgently.

"Captain Solo, he says he's tapped into the security holocam feed," C-3PO, R2-D2's protocol droid counterpart, reported. "The prisoner didn't escape. He was kidnapped!"

"We need to meet with General Rieekan and decide how to proceed," Leia said in alarm.

Han looked at her like she was crazy. "You meet with whoever you want, honey," he told her. "I'm going to find our missing prisoner."

They were all certain that Div was working for X-7, an Imperial assassin determined to murder Luke. Hiring Div wasn't X-7's first attempt. He'd tried to kill Luke several times—and had once set up *Han* to look like the assassin. It wasn't the kind of thing Han was ready to forget. X-7 was due for some payback. And he had disappeared. Div might be their only way of finding him.

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Besides, even if Div was a hired gun for an Imperial assassin, he'd turned out to be a pretty good guy. He'd helped Han out of more than one tight situation, and Han wasn't about to let a bunch of kidnappers just carry him off into the jungle. Not without a fight.

"We need a strategy, Han!" Leia said, looking annoyed. Of course, she rarely looked any other way—at least, when she was looking at him. "We can't go rushing into the jungle without any—"

Ignoring her, Han cocked his head at Luke. "You coming, kid?"

Luke glanced back and forth between Han and Leia. He hesitated for only a second. "We can't waste time," he told Leia apologetically. "If we lose Div, we'll never find X-7."

Han stole a moment to shoot Leia a victorious look. Then he took off toward the exit. He hoped that once they got outside, they could spot signs of a struggle or *something* to lead them in the right direction. Without pausing, he activated his comlink. "Chewie, we've got a situation here. Meet me at the barracks, quick as you can."

Behind him, he heard Leia ordering C-3PO to report to General Rieekan. Then she said, "Come on, Artoo. Looks like it's up to us to keep Han out of trouble."

Han grinned. *Good luck, lady*, he thought.

It was a fool's mission. But it was always fun to watch her try.

They trooped through the trees, following a twisting path of broken branches and shallow footprints. The trail ended in a narrow clearing at the heart of the jungle. R2-D2's tracking skills had led them this far. But now he was picking up no traces of Div anywhere. Chewbacca, who had a much keener sense of smell than the humans, was also having no luck. They'd reached a dead end.

"No, we are *not* turning back," Luke insisted angrily.

"What else can we do?" Leia asked.

## STAR WARS: Trapped

*"Find him,"* Luke said. "This is our fault."

Leia shook her head. "Luke, no—"

*"We* locked him up," Luke said. *"We* bound him. And when they came for him..." He shook his head. "We have to find him."

"You ever think he might not want to be found?" Han said. "Maybe this whole thing's a setup. Some of his friends bust him out, make it look like a kidnapping—"

"No," Luke retorted. "Div wouldn't—" He cut himself off. "Okay. Maybe you're right."

Leia looked at him in surprise. She knew that Luke had come to trust and respect Div while they were trapped on Kamino together. He'd been unhappy about the need to keep Div prisoner. Obviously, a part of him considered the mysterious pilot a friend. And it wasn't like Luke to distrust his friends.

"And maybe you're wrong," Luke continued. "But we're never going to know unless we find him."

"That's what we've been *trying* to do," Han reminded him.

"And we've tried everything," Leia told him. "It's time to go back. We need reinforcements."

"Not everything," Luke said, his mouth set in a determined line. "Come on, Artoo."

"Luke, where are you going?" Leia cried as Luke and R2-D2 disappeared into the jungle.

"To find Div!" Luke called back. And then he was gone.

Leia couldn't believe it. She glared at Han.

"What?" he asked.

"Why didn't you stop him?" she said.

*"Me?* Why didn't *you* stop him?"

Leia scowled. "Do I have to do everything?"

"Hey, maybe the kid knows what he's doing," Han said.

"Or maybe he—"

"Shhh!" Han urged her suddenly.

Chewbacca growled softly. "Yeah, buddy, I hear it, too," Han whispered.

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A loud rustling came from the jungle. It sounded like it was only a few meters to the west. Han drew his blaster. Leia tightened her grip on her blaster pistol, still in its holster. Without speaking, they positioned themselves back to back so they could cover all sides of the clearing.

The rustling grew louder. Now it was coming from both the east and the west.

"They've got us surrounded," Han whispered. "Stay behind me, Princess. I'll protect you."

"Since when do I need *you* to protect me?" Leia asked irritably. The noise was close now. Close and...familiar. "Besides, I don't think—"

"Shhh!" Han hissed. "Just follow my lead and no one will—aaaaaagh!"

A flock of kithawks erupted out of the trees. They swarmed the clearing. Han started beating them back with his blaster. But that only made them angry. The kithawks began to emit a high keening noise, and extended their claws. Then, as one, they dive-bombed him. More and more flowed out of the jungle, all heading straight for Han. "Get 'em off me!" Han shouted, nearly vanishing in the dark cloud of kithawks.

Leia burst into laughter. Kithawks were harmless. Back on Alderaan, many children kept them as pets. But Han was flailing and shouting as if he were being attacked by a horde of angry clawbirds.

"All right, Chewie," Leia said to the Wookiee, whose hairy shoulders were shaking with laughter. "Should we put him out of his misery?"

In response, Chewbacca threw back his head and let loose an echoing roar. The terrified kithawks took off as one, vanishing into the trees.

Han's eyes were squeezed shut, his arms waving wildly in an effort to fend off his attackers. It took him a moment to realize they were gone. Finally, he dropped his arms and opened his eyes. "Told you I'd protect you, Your Worshipfulness," he said.

## STAR WARS: Trapped

Leia plucked a feather out of his scruffy hair. “Lucky me.”

Thorny branches slapped at his face and legs. Luke hacked through them with his lightsaber, forcing his way deeper and deeper into the dense jungle growth. Massassi trees towered overhead, their canopy of leaves blocking out the sun. His feet sank into a soft bed of mud and leaves, and when he passed, it sprang back into place, obliterating his footsteps—as it had obliterated any traces of Div and his captors.

This was pointless. The jungle stretched on for miles in all directions. Luke had picked up a few tracking skills back on Tatooine. But following Jawa tracks across the desert was a lot different from tracking mysterious kidnappers through a jungle. He had no idea where to start.

“What do you think, little guy?” Luke asked R2-D2. The droid beeped at him helplessly.

Luke sighed. “I know. But we *have* to find him.”

R2-D2 beeped again, pointing at Luke’s lightsaber with his manipulator arm.

“I don’t think this is going to help,” Luke said, confused. The astromech droid trilled a long series of beeps and whistles, obviously frustrated. Suddenly, Luke understood. “You don’t mean that I should use the lightsaber, do you? You mean I should use the *Force*!”

R2-D2 beeped excitedly. His domed head spun in a circle.

Luke shook his head. “I wish I could. I know that’s what Ben would have done. But I don’t know how.”

The astromech droid just pointed to the lightsaber again, insistent.

“I guess I could try,” Luke agreed. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

He wasn’t sure how to start. So he just stood, waiting. Feeling somewhat silly, he closed his eyes and tried to clear his mind of distractions. He focused intently on Div.

Nothing happened.

## Alex Wheeler

*Come on, Ben, he thought. Help me out.*

It was so frustrating, knowing he had this power in himself and no way to reach it. If only there was someone to tell him what to do.

*Or you could figure it out for yourself.*

It wasn't Ben's voice in his head. It was his own.

Luke slowed his breathing. He relaxed his muscles. This time, he didn't try to focus his mind on Div, or on anything. He let his thoughts roam freely, as they did when he was drifting off to sleep. Instead of blocking out the world around him, he soaked it in. The soft mud beneath his boots, the chirps of the chucklucks, the rich, heavy scent of the purple Massassi bark. If the jungle had something to tell him, he was listening.

Again, nothing happened. But when Luke opened his eyes, some impulse drove him to look toward the southwest. And he noticed something he hadn't before: a regularity, almost a pattern, in the randomness of the jungle growth. But in one spot it was broken, more branches were bent and more flowers trampled than should have been. Something had come through the trees here. Maybe an animal.

But Luke didn't think so. "Come on, Artoo." He urged the astromech droid to hurry through the trees. "I sure hope this works."

He didn't know if it was the Force that made everything seem sharper, made every twisted branch and shallow footprint jump out in a way they never had before. But he didn't question it. He just followed his instincts. They brought him to a clearing, where a beat-up Firespray ship was powering up its engines. Three men loaded an unconscious figure into the cargo bay. It had to be Div.

Luke was outnumbered and outgunned, with no time to wait for reinforcements. He was going to have to handle this himself.

"Go find the others and tell them I went after Div," Luke said to R2-D2. "Tell them I'll be back."



## STAR WARS: Trapped

The droid beeped in alarm, but Luke ignored it. He crept closer to the ship, careful not to let the men see him. Two of the men climbed into the cockpit while the third climbed into the cargo bay. The doors began to slide shut.

It was his best chance. Also his last chance.

Luke ran toward the ship as fast as he could. One man caught sight of him and began to shout, but the noise was drowned out by the thundering engines. As the man fumbled for a blaster, Luke threw himself into the cargo bay. The doors shut behind him as blasterfire sprayed the bulkheads.

“What do you think you’re doing?” the man shouted, taking aim at Luke.

Luke activated his lightsaber and struck out blindly. The laserfire bounced off the blue beam and slammed into a large stack of heavy crates. They toppled over, landing squarely on top of the man with the blaster. With a loud “*Oof*,” he collapsed to the floor.

Luke rushed to Div, who lay in a corner, bound and unconscious. “Come on, wake up,” he muttered. “We need to get you out of here before—” The engines flared and the ship lifted off the ground. “Before that happens.” Luke braced himself against the wall as the ship rocketed through the atmosphere.

It seemed they were going for a ride.

## Chapter Three

Luke used his lightsaber to cut through Div's restraints. "Div, wake up!" he said again, careful to keep his voice down. But Div didn't move.

Luke was on his own.

He nudged the fallen kidnapper with his foot. The body didn't stir. But there were still two more on the other side of the bulkhead. He'd have to deal with them—preferably *before* they figured out they had a stowaway.

A narrow retractable panel separated the cargo bay from the cockpit. Luke inched it aside and peeked through the slender gap. One of the men bent over the controls, programming something into the autopilot. He ran a hand through his dark red hair, then hesitated over the control panel, as if nervous about the flight path.

"Just do it," growled the other. Tall and muscular, he looked uncomfortable, cramped in the narrow copilot seat. "We got what he wanted. Time for our reward."

"Never heard of him *rewarding* anyone," the redhead muttered.

"First time for everything," the big one said. "*Now.*"

## STAR WARS: Trapped

There was a rustling behind Luke. He whirled around. Div was stirring. Eyes still closed, Div lashed out with his arm, whacking the plastoid bulkhead.

"Hey, you hear that?" the copilot asked, jumping up from his seat. He opened a channel on the comlink.

Luke held his breath.

"Griff, everything okay with the prisoner?" the co-pilot asked. "Griff?"

Griff, lying unconscious on the floor of the cargo bay, did not respond.

It was now or never. Luke activated his lightsaber again. Blue blade held high, he burst into the cockpit. The copilot barreled toward him. Luke struck out with the lightsaber, but the man grabbed his arm and twisted hard. Luke swallowed a gasp of pain. He tossed the lightsaber to his other hand. The blade whipped through the air and sliced effortlessly through the man's bulging belly. He dropped to the ground, curled up and cradling the wound.

Laserfire screamed past Luke, scorching the wall behind him.

The pilot stood before the controls, blaster aimed at Luke. "Where did you come from? What do you want? What'd you do to Tyrus? What's that sword thing? Who *are* you?"

Luke swept his gaze across the tiny cockpit. There was a chance he'd be able to block the laserfire with his lightsaber. But he'd be a lot more confident about blocking it with a chair, or a storage crate, or a nice thick durasteel bulkhead. "Which question do you want me to answer first?" he asked, stalling.

The pilot shrugged. "How about...none of them?"

He fired.

Luke ducked, closed his eyes, let the Force guide his hands.

The laserfire smacked into his lightsaber. Luke stumbled backward with the impact.

"Watch it." A voice came from behind him. And then another shot. The pilot clutched his chest and pitched forward, tumbling to the floor. Luke spun around to see Div grinning

## Alex Wheeler

behind him. “You’re welcome,” Div said. “Now, what are you doing here?”

“Rescuing you,” Luke said.

Div raised an eyebrow. Then he raised his blaster. “Don’t move!” he shouted.

Luke froze. But Div wasn’t aiming at him.

Groaning with pain, the pilot hoisted himself up to the control panel. “If you want to live, don’t move!” Div warned him.

But the pilot didn’t stop. He reached toward the controls. Div pulled the trigger. Laserfire sailed across the cockpit, peppering the pilot’s body. He tumbled forward onto the controls, his hand slapping down on a large red switch. With a weak but satisfied smile, he dropped to the floor.

And in the viewscreen, the sky exploded with light as the ship jumped into hyperspace.

Stars streamed past as the ship hurtled through space.

Moments later, the autopilot took them out of hyperspace. The ship came to rest in an empty pocket of the galaxy with no planetary systems anywhere in sight. They could have been anywhere. And they had a bigger problem: the Star Destroyer looming in their viewscreen. Hundreds of times their size, the arrow-shaped silver ship hung motionless in the sky less than twenty klicks away, as if it had been waiting for them—which, Div realized, it almost certainly was.

Div glanced at Luke. “When does the rescuing start?” he asked drily.

“Maybe we can escape before it notices us,” Luke said, fiddling with the unfamiliar hyperdrive controls.

Div jabbed a boot into the unconscious pilot, hoping the man could give them some clue as to what they were up against. But he didn’t stir. Luke was muttering to himself, trying to program a new set of coordinates. “It’s an old ship,” he

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murmured. "It's going to take at least six minutes before the drive is ready to jump again."

"I'm not sure we have six minutes," Div said.

The launch hangars of the Star Destroyer slid partially open. A single TIE fighter slipped through the narrow crevice.

"Just one?" Luke said. "We can take it."

"Great," Div said. "But who's going to take *them*?" As he spoke, the hangar doors were sliding wide open. A fleet of TIE fighters poured out, blanketing the sky.

An Imperial transmission came through from the Star Destroyer. "Identify yourselves," a flat, tinny voice commanded. "Imperial authentication and docking codes required."

Luke took a weapons inventory while Div again tried to rouse the pilot, shaking him and propping him on his feet. No luck.

"A few concussion missiles and a defective laser cannon," Luke said quickly. "That's it."

Enough to dispatch three, maybe four TIE fighters. No more.

"Identify yourselves," the voice said again.

Div lunged for the comm. "We're here on official Imperial business," he said quickly. "We're expected."

The voice was unimpressed. "Identification and authorization. Now."

"How long before the hyperdrive is ready?" Div said.

"Four minutes now."

"Okay, we definitely don't have four minutes," Div said. He powered up the missile launchers. It wasn't much, but it would have to do.

The comm buzzed with an incoming message. But this wasn't coming from the Star Destroyer. It was coming from one of the TIE fighters.

"That's a Rebel frequency!" Luke exclaimed. They bent their heads together over the transmission, eyes widening in surprise. The TIE fighter had sent them a set of Imperial docking codes.

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That wasn't all the TIE fighter had sent them. The message also included coordinates to be input into the hyperdrive. The TIE fighter was sending them somewhere. It was the strangest rescue Div had ever seen.

Or it was a trap.

## Chapter Four

*A kind face leans over him, and blond hair brushes his forehead. Her lips skim his cheek, and she smiles. She smells like zynthorn blossoms. Sleep now, she says in her soft, musical voice. He feels safe. He feels at home.*

X-7 jerked the speeder back in its lane, a split second before ramming into a blue airspeeder.

“Watch it, you kreetle!” shouted the Trandoshan at the wheel, shaking a clawed fist at X-7’s jet-black speeder.

“Focus,” X-7 murmured, weaving through the dense Coruscant traffic. One trillion people swarmed the surface of this planet-sized city, and at the moment, it seemed all of them were crowding the skylanes of Quadrant 472. Trast speeder trucks and Zzip Astral-8s and SoroSuubs of every shape and color jockeyed for position as they whizzed past the skyscrapers, burrowing into the city like gravel-maggots infesting a rotting muja fruit. X-7 didn’t possess the normal human inclination to prefer one environment over another. The mountains of Julio, the plains of Loped VII, the breathtaking cliffs of Kenosha, the bare, craggy surface of a lifeless moon—they were all the same to him. But if he *had* had a preference, this would be its opposite. The crystalline spires glowing in the blazing red sunset, the millions of windows glinting in the dying light, the layers upon layers of

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*people* covering every inch of the surface, buildings stretching untold kilometers into the sky—it was supposed to be the pride of the galaxy. It gave X-7 a headache.

Navigating the skylanes demanded his full attention. But how was he supposed to concentrate with these wretched *memories* floating around in his head?

*"I dare you!" the boy cries.*

*"No, I dare you!" he shouts back.*

*The boy laughs and steers his speeder bike straight for the edge of the ravine. He surges forward at top speed, then pulls up at the very last minute. The momentum carries him across. He waves from the other side. "Your turn now, you sprigging coward!"*

*He is afraid. But he is also determined. He leans forward. Pushes the throttle. Wind thunders in his ears. The ground opens beneath him, and he is flying—*

"Enough!" X-7 shouted. Blind with rage, he rammed the speeder into the bright red sport speeder in front of him, knocking the sport into a wild spin across four levels of traffic. The sport crashed into a zip speeder, which smashed into two Flash speeders. Crushed and twisted durasteel spiraled through the air; drivers moaned and cried; sirens screamed. And X-7 quietly steered his heavily armored Serous into a narrow alleyway, fleeing the chaos he'd caused.

The needless destruction made him feel better. And that was the problem.

*Feeling angry.*

*Feeling better.*

*Feeling anything at all. It wasn't right. He wasn't built for it. He was a tool, not a person. How many times had his commander burned that message into his brain? The Commander, who had taken X-7's flesh-and-blood form and molded it into something better, something perfect. Scooped out his mind, purging it of memories, of emotions, of weakness, and turning his will to durasteel.*



All these years, X-7 would have *felt* grateful, if he could have felt anything at all.

But now everything was going wrong. It had started with the *feelings*. Frustration, impatience, rage. They'd clouded his mind; that was why he hadn't been able to complete his mission, he told himself. It was why Skywalker still lived. And the more often Skywalker foiled him, the angrier he grew.

Then, as if the feelings had wedged open a long-sealed vault, the memories had arrived. Not even memories—just flashes, really. Nothing he could grab hold of or understand. A too-familiar scent. A few notes of a long-forgotten song. A voice. And now, it was even worse, these incomplete moments, confusing stories from someone else's life. As nonsensical as a dream.

Dreaming. Something else X-7 wasn't supposed to be capable of.

He was broken.

He must be broken, because that was the only possible explanation for his not wanting to be fixed. For his suddenly having *wants*, which were as alien as the *feelings*. For his disobeying a direct order from his commander to return for retraining.

It was why instead he was here, guiding his speeder into the alley behind the Commander's building, with an armory of weapons on the seat beside him.

He didn't *want* retraining. He *wanted* answers.

The thirty-story building was home to several third-rate Imperial officers, those deemed unworthy of space in the more desirable Imperial headquarters. On the plus side, being this far from the Emperor meant less chance of running into Lord Vader in the hallway. On the other hand, placement in this quadrant was often the first stop to a far less appealing posting: the Outer Rim perhaps. Or to being "promoted" to commandant on a prison moon, forced to live out the rest of one's life eating diluted gruel, administering executions, and waiting to die.

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X-7's research had revealed that this was likely to be his master's fate—although the Commander himself hadn't yet figured that out.

The building was stocked with a full complement of stormtroopers in addition to the handful of Imperial has-beens and never-weres. But again, they were hardly the cream of the crop. With a little stealth and some cheap false docs, X-7 could have waltzed into the Commander's office without notice.

He chose not to.

The docs brought him into the building and onto the turbolift. But when he reached the sixty-second floor, he stepped out with his dart shooter in hand. It was small enough to be concealed in his palm; the guards never knew what was coming. He aimed for the small pocket of flesh just below their helmets and above their body armor—a little-known but fatal weakness. One stormtrooper, two, three, toppled to the floor with a satisfying clatter. Three more dropped, leaving only one on his feet. On a whim, X-7 decided to give him a chance to fire. Lasers shot from the blaster, peppering the wall of the turbolift as X-7 dodged the beams. The stormtrooper charged, and X-7 leapt out of the way, firing a blaster as he soared through the air.

The stormtrooper screamed and dropped to the floor beside his friends.

X-7 had hoped a little exercise might leave him calmer for his encounter with the Commander. Killing was always a good pressure release. But not this time.

*No matter, X-7 thought. I'll have likely more to do on the way out.*

He blasted the lock on the Commander's office door. Soresh leapt out of his chair, reaching for a switch above his desk. "What the—"

X-7 streaked across the room and slapped a hand over the Commander's mouth. He pressed a blaster to the Commander's temple. "Your security team has been taken care of," he informed the Commander. "All the same, I'd prefer you not to press your silent alarm. Please."

Very slowly, the Commander lowered his arm.

"Sit down," X-7 ordered him.

It was strange giving orders to his master: No satisfaction in it. But he had no intention of hurting the Commander. He just wanted answers. And he'd run out of options.

"When I invited you to return home, X-7, this isn't quite what I meant," the Commander said lightly.

"I want to know who I am," X-7 said. He stayed behind his master, partly because it was the strategically stronger position, but mostly because it was easier not having to see his face.

"You are X-7, agent to the Emperor," the Commander said. "The Empire's most skillful assassin...until recently, that is."

As always, the reminder of his failure pained him. "Who I was," X-7 said gruffly. "Before *this*."

The Commander shook his head. "You're smarter than that. Whoever that person was, he's dead. Your brain is no longer equipped for human emotions, human memories. Trying to dredge them up again would probably drive you to madness." He paused. "Perhaps it's already begun? If that's what's going on here, X-7, if you're starting to *feel* things, I can help you—"

"No!" Only the truth would help him. Finding out who he was, the whole story, was the only way to decipher the flashes—and make them go away. If he could find that person he'd once been, he could purge all traces of him, once and for all. He could be pure. The Commander couldn't do that for him. X-7 needed to do it for himself.

*Wanted* to do it.

That was the only reason for this, he told himself. It wasn't some foolish effort to regain his past. It was a *mission*, the only way he could heal himself and continue to serve his commander. That was all that mattered, *feelings* or not.

"You're determined?" the Commander asked. "Nothing I say can convince you this is a disastrous idea?"

"Nothing," X-7 confirmed.

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The Commander sighed. "I can't tell you who you were, because even I don't know," he said. "But I can tell you how to find out."

X-7 felt his lips curling upward; he felt something warm radiate across his chest.

It was repulsive, humiliating, but inescapable: He felt happy.

Footsteps pounded down the hallway, approaching the office. Reinforcements were on their way. Quickly, the Commander gave him a series of passwords that would let him dig deep into the bowels of the Imperial computer system. X-7 took the information, along with several files pertaining to Project Omega's methods for selecting and training its candidates. Then, without a word to the Commander, he ran full speed at the huge window overlooking the city. A shower of transparisteel exploded as he dropped into the sky.

Soresh peered out the window. No bloody figure lay sprawled on the ground sixty-two stories below. Not that he could see clearly through the layers of clogged sky lanes. But Soresh was almost certain that X-7 wasn't down there. He'd have had liquid cable, or grappling hooks, or an airspeeder on autopilot waiting beneath the window, *some* kind of backup plan. He was too smart not to. Soresh should know: X-7 was his creation.

The stormtroopers blasted through the door, their weapons drawn. "Sir! Sir! Is everything all right in here?"

Soresh rolled his eyes. The incompetence was breathtaking. He made a mental note to take down all their ID numbers. They'd be dodging energy spiders in the Spice Mines of Kessel by the end of the week. "It is *now*," he snapped. "What took you so long?"

"It was a sneak attack, sir," the lead stormtrooper said. "They took down your entire security detail."

"They?" Soresh arched an eyebrow. "I think you mean *'he'*." One man took down seven of your most finely trained men?" At least he wouldn't have to go to the trouble of punishing them for

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their failures. That was one bright note to the dark day. And perhaps their replacements would be *competent*. Although he doubted it. The Empire was having a harder and harder time finding good people—just one of the reasons that Soresh had such high hopes for Project Omega. When men's minds were properly molded, there was no place for incompetence, no room for error. When you built a man from the ground up, he became incapable of disobedience or failure.

Or at least, that was the way it was supposed to work.

"Dismissed," he told the stormtroopers, waving them out of the office. Pathetic.

Of course things would have been easier if the stormtroopers had done their job and taken X-7 into custody. But Soresh hadn't been afraid. X-7 would not have hurt him. It was the prime directive of his programming: His commander's life was supreme. Soresh could only imagine how much pain defying his orders must be causing X-7. Attempting to *injure* his master? The pain would have been unbearable.

And perhaps it was better this way. The information Soresh had provided would send X-7 on a fruitless chase across the galaxy. He would find no answers to his questions; no answers could be found. All participants in Project Omega had their former identities completely wiped from the system, and had their faces surgically altered to ensure no awkward encounters with people from their past. X-7 was chasing a ghost. And when he realized that, he would eventually return to the fold, to his commander, to Soresh. He would be repaired. And if that didn't work, he would be terminated.

It was hardly the most pressing of problems.

Soresh's comlink buzzed. He drew in a sharp breath. It was an incoming transmission from Lord Vader.

*Now* he was afraid. Soresh told himself that Darth Vader couldn't have heard about X-7's misbehavior. But if he had—if word had leaked out—it could put the future of Project Omega in jeopardy. And if Vader was taking a personal interest for some

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reason...well, everyone knew what happened to those who found themselves on Vader's bad side. And it seemed all he had were bad sides.

Soresh gathered his nerve. It galled him that Vader could do this to him, make him cower and tremble.

But then, he was a cowardly man. He'd always known this about himself, detested it until he recognized it for what it was: a sign of his intelligence. Cowards were simply people who knew how to survive. It was the fools with no fear who died prematurely.

Vader's time was coming.

Soresh promised himself that. Then he took the call.

"Yes, Lord Vader?" he said in as even a voice as he could muster.

For several long moments, there was nothing but the sound of Vader's labored breathing. When he finally spoke, his voice filled the room. The lights even seemed to dim in deference to Lord Vader's dark presence.

"I am displeased," Vader said.

Soresh shuddered, imagining the *thing* behind that black mask focusing its rage on him. Everyone knew that it was unwise to speculate on what kind of monster lay beneath Vader's elaborate armor. But everyone had their suspicions.

Their nightmares.

"Lord Vader, I assure you, it's just a momentary malfunction, nothing to trouble yourself about, and certainly Project Omega can continue as—"

"Silence!" Vader said. "Your pointless project means nothing to me."

Soresh knew enough not to speak.

"The Rebel pilot," Vader said, an ominous note of warning in his voice. "The one responsible for blowing up the Death Star. You are to stop your pursuit of him."

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No one knew of his secret plan to hunt down Luke Skywalker. No one but X-7, and malfunction or not, he'd never go crying to Vader. "What makes you think—"

"Consider your next words very *carefully*," Vader advised.

Soresh had heard rumors of Vader's power. It was said he could suffocate a man with a thought, from across the room. It was said that his powers extended across the reach of space, that he could strike a man down wherever he stood. Of course, they were just rumors.

Probably.

"The Emperor has made it a top priority to hunt down that pilot," Soresh said. He was determined to prove himself to the Emperor and gain the respect he deserved. But he wasn't intending to do it by going head to head with Vader. He'd watched his colleagues make that stupid mistake again and again. None of them had survived the attempt. "As a loyal servant of the Empire, I of course hope to do whatever I can to further the Emperor's goals."

Beneath the words lay his real meaning: *I serve the Emperor, not you.*

"The Emperor cannot be troubled to concern himself with the fate of a single Rebel pilot—or a single Imperial commander," Vader replied.

The meaning behind his words was equally clear: *The Emperor won't protect you, not from me.*

"Return your attention to your own affairs," Vader said. "Leave Skywalker to me."

The transmission cut off abruptly. Soresh opened his desk drawer and pulled out his flask of Dorian Quill. He took a long swig.

His hands were shaking.

But amid the terror, his mind was spinning. Vader knew the pilot's name—perhaps had known all along? And yet instead of hunting him down, as the Emperor desired, Vader was letting the

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man live free. At least for now. And he was warning Soresh to stay away. Because he wanted the glory of the kill all to himself?

Maybe, Soresh thought.

But maybe it was something else. Something Vader didn't want anyone to know about.

Something that could destroy him.



## Chapter Five

The digits flashed on the screen, waiting for Luke to make a decision. Or rather, a series of decisions, each of which could get them killed.

Input the Imperial docking codes—and, if the codes were false, risk being blown to bits by a fleet of TIE fighters. Or ignore the Imperial docking codes—and risk being blown to bits by a fleet of TIE fighters.

Even if he did transmit the docking codes and they worked, then what? Attempt to board the Star Destroyer and find out exactly what the Empire wanted from Lune Divinian? Buy themselves enough time to follow their mysterious helper's instructions and take a hyperspace jump to who-knew-where? Or flee back to Yavin 4, without answers—but with their lives?

"I think we should go for it," Div said suddenly. "I...I just have a good feeling about this."

"You want to make a decision based on a *hunch*?" Luke asked, knowing exactly what Han would have to say about that. And yet Div had put his finger on exactly what Luke was feeling. Was that the Force, telling him that the mysterious TIE fighter was trustworthy?

Or was it just wishful thinking?

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Aware that time was running out, Luke closed his eyes, trying to connect with his instincts. But when he did, all he saw was X-7's sneering face—a cold reminder of what happened when you trusted the wrong person. There were always consequences.

"Trust your instincts," Div said, and at the sound of his voice, the image of X-7 fell away. "And in the meantime, get ready to fire."

*Trust your feelings*, echoed a voice in his head. Ben's voice.

His feelings were telling him that an ally was nearby. A friend. But was that friend in the TIE fighter, helping him escape—or was the friend a prisoner desperate to be rescued from the Star Destroyer? What if the TIE fighter was just trying to send Luke on a wild-goose chase so he wouldn't discover the truth?

The seconds were ticking by, and the TIE fighters were powering up their weapons. But Luke had learned something else from Ben: Hasty action could often be more dangerous than inaction. Sometimes it was best to wait until you were sure.

"Luke, make a drokking decision or—"

A spurt of laserfire burst out of the nearest TIE fighter and slammed into the ship, which bucked beneath them. Luke was thrown off his feet. He flew backward, slamming into the rear bulkhead. A sharp pain radiated through his head and down his spine. Div was saying something, but Luke couldn't take it in. His ears were ringing. Red spots swam across his field of vision. The ship shuddered as Div fired toward the TIE fighters. Smoke billowed from the sensor array. Luke shook his head, trying to clear it. Unsteady but determined, he pulled himself to his feet.

Div was frantically trying to keep them alive. But they were wildly outnumbered, and they'd already used most of their missiles. As for evasive maneuvers, the ship handled about as well as a three-legged dewback.

They were a sitting target.

Laserfire lit up the sky as TIE fighters swarmed. Then, without warning, one of the fighters turned on its own. Its laser

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cannons fired a blast at the nearest Imperial ship. The ship shattered, sending debris spinning wildly into the rest of the fleet. The renegade TIE fighter was everywhere at once, picking its way through the Imperial fleet, taking them down one by one.

It was all the distraction Luke needed.

He activated the hyperdrive, hoping they wouldn't end up inside a sun.

They jumped.

Light streamed past the viewscreen as they blazed through hyperspace. Smears of stars streaked across the black of space. And then, after an instant that felt like an eternity, the stars were stars again, points of light in the darkness. Space was silent, still, and empty. They had arrived.

Somewhere.

"I hope you're right about this," Luke said nervously.

"Me? You're the one who powered up the hyperdrive and took a blind jump."

"You'd rather we sat waiting to be blown out of the sky?" Luke argued, annoyed. He *knew* that Div would have done the same thing if he'd had the chance. He was obviously just irritated that Luke had moved faster. "Besides, you're the one who said we could trust this guy."

"I don't trust anyone," Div said.

As he spoke, a TIE fighter appeared out of hyperspace.

"That's impossible!" Luke exclaimed. "TIE fighters don't have hyperdrives!"

"Feel free to complain to the Empire," Div said, manning the missile launchers. "*I'm* going to get the weapons ready. You know, just in case the impossible TIE fighter decides to blow us out of the sky."

It seemed likely the TIE fighter was the same ship that had sent them the coordinates, though there was no way to tell. But now it was battle-scarred, deep gashes running up and down its hull. It had clearly taken some heavy fire before jumping, which

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meant the pilot, whoever he was, must have been good. TIE fighters weren't built to withstand much fire. Imperial pilots, like their ships, were considered infinitely replaceable.

Of course, the ships also weren't built to make hyperspace jumps. Obviously this was no ordinary TIE fighter—which meant it was likely no ordinary pilot.

Ignoring them, the ship maneuvered into orbit around a nearby moon and disappeared into the thin atmosphere. A transmission came through, on the same Rebel frequency used before. More coordinates, this time for a landing spot on the face of the moon.

Luke and Div exchanged a glance.

"We've come this far," Luke said, and took the Firespray down to the surface.

The atmosphere was thick enough that they could breathe but thin enough that they could still see the stars. The moon was dead, arid, flat, and small. In the distance, Luke could make out the curve of the horizon. They stayed in the ship, keeping their weapons trained on the TIE fighter. Its hatch opened, and a figure stepped out. He was dressed in the uniform of an Imperial pilot, but an Imperial pilot would never be so out of shape. As the man drew closer to the ship, Luke glimpsed his face. He nearly laughed in relief. "Come on," he told Div. "It's okay. He's a friend." He flung open the hatch of the Firespray and hurried to meet their rescuer, a man he'd never expected to see again. Ferus Olin.

Div followed slowly.

"Luke," Ferus said when Luke had reached him. He didn't seem at all surprised.

"Ferus, I can't believe it!" Luke said. He'd met Ferus Olin on Delaya, the sister planet to Alderaan. The old man had known Leia when she was a child, and he'd quickly proven himself to be a brave and solid ally. Luke had hoped he would join the Rebel Alliance, but he had refused. *He has a mission of his own*, Leia had said, sounding skeptical. *Or he's just too cowardly to fight*. But Ferus

hadn't seemed like a coward, not to Luke. He'd seemed wise and oddly trustworthy. His very presence was comforting, as if he always knew more than what he was saying, and was ready to face it. *Just like Ben*, Luke thought, not for the first time.

Ferus was the last person he would have expected to meet on this strange moon, especially piloting a TIE fighter and dressed in Imperial uniform. But there was almost no one else he would rather have seen.

"Div, this is Ferus—" Luke broke off as he spotted Div's ashen face. He was standing stiffly, like a soldier at attention. His hand twitched toward his holster, as if he was fighting the temptation to draw. "It's okay," Luke assured him. "Ferus is a friend."

"I'm pretty sure you don't know *who* this is," Div said quietly, glaring at Ferus. The older man's eyes widened.

Luke looked back and forth between them, confused. "Do you two know each other?"

Before anyone could answer, Ferus swept him into a fierce bear hug. "I've been worried about you, Luke. Glad to see you're all right."

The hug seemed somewhat strange; he didn't know Ferus *that* well. But he didn't want to be rude. "No need to worry," he told Ferus. "I'm fine."

Something pricked the back of his neck. He slapped at it. Probably a banda bug, he thought idly. Although this moon looked pretty dead. Not a likely environment for a banda—no food for them to nibble on.

And why was he thinking about bandas?

Why were his thoughts flying in a million directions, like a flock of frightened hawk-bats?

Why did he suddenly feel like the ground was buckling beneath him?

Luke opened his mouth but lacked the strength to speak. In fact, he realized, he lacked the strength to do much of anything.

And then he was on the ground, staring up at the night sky.

**Alex Wheeler**

*I'm so tired*, he thought. *Why am I so tired?*  
But he was too tired to wonder for very long.  
Instead, he closed his eyes.  
And went to sleep.

## Chapter Six

“**L**uke needs us!” Leia shouted. Why wouldn’t anyone on Yavin 4 understand?

“I fear that may be, Your Highness,” General Rieekan said, “but we have no way of knowing where he is. I can’t authorize a fool’s mission.”

“Are you calling me a *fool*, General?” Leia asked coolly.

Han cleared his throat. “I’m sure the general’s not—”

“The general can speak for himself,” Leia snapped.

General Rieekan sighed and shook his head. “The answer is no, Your Highness. I’m sorry.”

Leia turned her back on both of them and stormed out of the temple. She heard Han behind her and picked up her pace. As he walked faster, she began to run. He didn’t catch up with her until they’d nearly arrived at the hangar deck.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Han asked, grabbing her as she headed toward the nearest and fastest craft. She shrugged him off.

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m going to find Luke!”

“And how, exactly, are you going to do that, Your Worshipfulness? You gonna fly around in circles with your eyes closed and just wait to run into him?”

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"I have to do *something*, Han! Are you coming or not?"

"This is crazy, Leia. You heard General Rieekan—"

"You're siding with *him*?" Leia couldn't believe it. Han had never turned down the opportunity to do something crazy. *Never*. But now that Luke's life was at stake, *now* he wanted to talk about doing the sensible thing? Leia was angry; felt helpless. *Of course* she knew that a rescue mission was foolish. Of course she knew logically that there was almost no chance of her finding Luke. The galaxy was a big place, and she didn't even know where to start. But...it was *Luke*. She was convinced that something would guide her to him. It always did. "Don't you see, Han?" she cried, frustrated. "I have to."

"Have to what, Princess? Spend the rest of your life jumping to random coordinates, shouting his name out the window? You really think that's going to work?"

"At least I'm doing something," she retorted. "Unlike *you*. You're happy just sitting around doing *nothing*."

Han grimaced at her. "Listen, lady, if you think this makes me happy—" He stopped himself, then murmured something under his breath. Leia suddenly realized he was counting to ten. When he spoke again, his voice was even. "The kid'll be fine. He's gotten himself out of plenty of tight spaces. Tighter than this."

"You don't even know what *this* is."

"Yeah, but I know Luke. The kid's not about to go down without a fight."

"Exactly. Which is why *some* of us are trying to fight for him."

"Some of us?" So much for counting to ten. Han's anger was back. "Guess I don't have to ask who '*some of us*' is. So I don't care? That's what you're saying?"

"Look at you, Han! You have less feeling than a droid!" She nodded toward the *Millennium Falcon*, where C-3PO was becoming hysterical. R2-D2 beeped soothingly.



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“What do you mean, ‘this always happens, and he always survives?’” C-3PO asked indignantly. “Nothing like this has ever—”

R2-D2 beeped again.

“Oh. Yes,” C-3PO said. “But that was different, because on Kamino he—”

The astromech trilled, his lights flashing.

“That was different, *too*,” C-3PO insisted. “Who knew he could survive a Podracer explosion? But this, *this*...Oh dear, Artoo, I just don’t know what I’ll do if something happens to Master Luke. This is a catastrophe!”

Han snorted. “Look, Princess, you don’t get this yet, but maybe someday when you’re a little older, a little more experienced—”

“*Excuse* me?” In principle, Leia believed that physical violence should be used only when all other courses of action had been exhausted. In practice, she was about ready to punch him in the gut.

“—you’ll see that someone has to stay calm. Be strong. You can’t just run around panicking about every little thing that goes wrong. You should take things like a—” He spotted Chewbacca emerging from the *Millennium Falcon*. “Well, like a Wookiee.” He slapped Chewbacca on his furry back. “Right, pal? Go on, tell her Luke’s going to be just fine.”

At Luke’s name, Chewbacca threw back his giant head and unleashed a mournful roar.

Han looked at Chewie in disgust.

“I don’t care what you say,” Leia said fiercely, starting toward the ship again. “I don’t care what anyone says. I’m going to find Luke.”

“Leia!” Han grabbed her arm and, this time, refused to let go. “We have to trust him,” he said, the mocking tone gone from his voice. “That’s the best thing we can do right now. It’s all we can do. We’ve got to trust him to come back to us.”

## Alex Wheeler

“But...” She didn’t want to admit he was right. She *couldn’t* just sit here and wait. It was too frustrating.

Too terrifying.

“He’ll be okay,” Han said, still gripping her arm. “He’ll be back.”

“You really believe that?” Leia peered intently into his eyes. Han was an excellent liar, but he’d never been very good at lying to her.

“I really do,” he said. But as he answered, he looked away.

“Please don’t,” Ferus said mildly as Div snatched the lightsaber from Luke’s belt. Ignoring the older man, Div activated the Jedi weapon. Ferus kept his eyes fixed on the gleaming blue beam. Div kept his eyes fixed on Ferus.

*Ferus Olin*, after all these years. A fairy-tale hero from his childhood. Ferus, who’d had all the answers.

Ferus, who’d turned his back and walked away.

*May the Force be with you, Lune*, he had said as Ferus prepared to leave. At the time, Lune was dimly aware that his mother had fallen in love with Clive Flax and that together they would be starting a new life and a new family. But all he really cared about was that he was getting a new brother. Trever, the teenaged orphan from Bellassa who needed a home. *Take care of Trever*, Ferus told Lune. Trever was like a son to Ferus—yet here he was, leaving the boy behind.

Ferus had said one more thing before saying good-bye forever: *You would have made a fine Jedi.*

With Garen Muln and Ry-Gaul dead, Ferus was the only person left in the galaxy who could teach Lune the Jedi way. And Ferus was saying good-bye. At the time, Lune had just grinned, thinking that it was a compliment. Not realizing everything he was about to lose.

Ferus hadn’t aged well. The lithe, resolute man Div remembered, the proud Jedi with laugh lines creasing his worried face and a defiant gaze that dared the world to cross him, that

person was gone. In his place was a prematurely old man with gray hair and a soft, bulging belly. As far as Div could tell, everything about him was soft. Since the last time they'd met, nearly twenty years before, Div had become a warrior. And Ferus had apparently become a Corellian cream puff. Though that cream puff had just put Luke on the ground.

Div would never have imagined that Ferus Olin, of all people, would turn to the dark side. But there he was, flying a TIE fighter. There he was, standing over Luke's unconscious form.

People changed.

"You've grown," Ferus said, a smile creeping across his face. He seemed unconcerned by the lightsaber aimed at his throat.

*He still has the Force*, Div reminded himself. The man might have grown old and soft, but he could likely disarm Div with a single thought.

"It's good to see you again, Lune," Ferus said softly. "Better than I could have imagined."

"Don't call me that. It's Div."

Lune was a child, who had needed protecting. A prodigy, a Force-sensitive. A hope. Lune was *special*, according to those who had died for him. Lune was the naïve child who'd been stuffed into an escape pod, blasted off from the asteroid, leaving his friends behind, stranded. Brave Rebels before the Rebellion, they sent their one and only hope flying to safety, then waited to die. Lune was the boy who'd floated through space in an escape pod, helpless, *useless*, as an energy bolt slammed into the asteroid and blasted it into debris. And then, years later, when the scars had finally healed, Lune had sat on a hilltop and watched his entire family die.

*Div* was a man. He had only one thing in common with that ignorant boy: He was a survivor.

"I take it this is as much of a joyous reunion as I can expect?" Ferus said with a glimmer of his familiar dry wit.

"Is he going to be all right?" Div asked, glancing at Luke.

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Ferus nodded. "Sleep dart. He'll be awake in an hour or so. I needed to buy us some time to talk—privately. There are certain things about me that Luke doesn't need to know."

"Like the fact that you're a Jedi," Div guessed.

"And does your friend know that *you* are?" Ferus asked.

"He's no friend. And I'm no Jedi."

Ferus didn't reply. He just looked pointedly at the lightsaber in Div's hand. As always, it felt so right. Like a piece of him too long absent had finally returned. Div deactivated the weapon and returned it to Luke's side. He had turned away from that life and away from the Force. He had lived with that empty hole inside him, that knowledge that he could have been something more, for a long time. The pain was no longer raw. It was tolerable.

Div scowled at Ferus. "Fine. The kid's out of the way. So here we are. You want to talk? Talk."

"Help me carry him?" Ferus said, kneeling before Luke's body. It was beyond lucky that he'd been able to sense Luke's presence in the Firespray. The Force was strong in Luke, very strong. "It's not safe out here in the open." Together, they lifted the unconscious Rebel and carried him toward the small shelter Ferus had been using as his base. They worked in silence. Ferus kept his head down but spread his attention, absorbing every detail of Lune with his peripheral vision. He had a feeling the boy wouldn't take kindly to being stared at. But it was tempting to do so.

It hurt seeing himself reflected in Lune's expression. The boy had once looked at him with respect, trusting, with the innocence of a child—the *ignorance* of a child—that Ferus would protect him. More than once, that trust, that duty to protect Lune, had been the only tether keeping Ferus from a bottomless fall into the dark side of the Force. But now...Ferus could feel Lune's disgust, his dismay at seeing what his old friend had become. How soft and flabby Ferus had grown over the years. How old.

How cowardly.

## STAR WARS: Trapped

Lune couldn't be expected to see beneath Ferus's disguise, to understand that he'd spent decades hiding in plain sight, pretending to be a harmless, senseless courtier. And Ferus couldn't explain it to him, not without explaining *why* it had been so imperative to disguise himself. Not without revealing the secret of Leia Organa, the child Ferus had been sworn to protect. Anakin's child.

Leia was the second child Ferus had sworn to protect, the second "galactic hope." Lune had been the first.

*He's alive*, Ferus told himself. That was something.

But it wasn't everything.

Ferus had long ago accepted that his mission would mean losing the respect of all around him, even Leia herself. Only Obi-Wan understood who Ferus truly was, and Obi-Wan was dead. This, too, Ferus had finally accepted. Much as he might have craved it, he didn't need Lune's admiration. So what hurt the most wasn't the look on Lune's face; it was the look in his eyes.

As Ferus had grown soft, Lune had grown hard. The boy Ferus remembered — sweet-tempered, mischievous, preternaturally smart, hopeful — that boy was gone. The man who appeared in his place shared many of his qualities, especially that quiet, intensely watchful mode that had seemed eerie in a young boy. But this man was cold and rigid, as if a layer of thick, tough scar tissue had crusted over his soul.

Suddenly, Lune looked up and met his eyes. "Take a holopic," he suggested caustically. "It'll last longer."

Something else the man had in common with the boy, Ferus observed: He still saw more than anyone expected.

"It's been too long," Ferus said softly. "I've thought of you often over the years. You and—"

"How do you know Luke?" Lune asked sharply. "What are you doing here on this cursed moon? What are *we* doing here?"

*He doesn't want me to say Trever's name*, Ferus thought. *Because he can't stand to hear it? Or he can't stand to hear it from me?*

## Alex Wheeler

"Fair enough," he said aloud. "I was an acquaintance of Princess Leia Organa on Alderaan. After the...disaster, I found the princess again, and came to know several of her friends. Good people."

"Apparently not good enough for you to tell them the truth about who you really are."

"If you'll let me explain, I think you'll see why it's important Luke not know I'm a Jedi," Ferus said, stalling for time. What was he supposed to say: *I'm keeping the secret because the ghost of a dead Jedi Master warned me that Luke wasn't ready?*

"Oh, I see," Lune spat out. "If the Empire knew the truth, you'd be a target. And if the Rebels knew the truth, they might expect you to *do* something. But you've become a coward. So you stay hidden."

"You think that little of me?" Ferus asked.

"I don't think of you at all," Lune said. "Not since I was a child, and you abandoned us all to die."

"I never abandoned you," Ferus said. "You had your mother and Clive, and—"

"And *I* was supposed to protect him, isn't that right?" Lune said sourly. "That's what you told me, before you left, that I should *take care of Trever*. I was a child. A *child*! You were a *Jedi*, and who were you protecting? Only yourself."

Ferus shook his head. "I thought you would be safe," he said desperately. "All of you. I had a mission—"

"So did they, that day," Lune said bitterly. "They all had missions. My mother. My father. *Trever*."

Ferus flinched at the name.

"You think you know what happened to them," Lune said. "I can see it on your face."

"And I'm so sorry for your loss," Ferus began.

"But you can't know. Not unless you were there. Like *I* was. But I was only fifteen, and they wouldn't let me go with them. Even though I could have helped. So I watched them from a hill

overlooking the factory. Like lizard-ants, swarming across the grounds, shooting, running, dying.”

Ferus wanted to stop listening. As Lune went on, relating their deaths in horrifying detail, Ferus wanted to summon the Force around his ears like a thick blanket, drowning out the noise. But he made himself hear it all. A Rebel mission betrayed from the inside. An ambush. His old friend Clive cut down where he stood, ripped through by blasterfire. Lune’s mother, Astri, fierce and proud, blown to bits by an Imperial grenade. And Trever. Trever, who had survived as an orphan on the streets of Bellassa when he was only a teenager, until Ferus had turned him into a soldier and a fugitive. Trever, who had died a prisoner, trapped inside the munitions factory when the concussion missiles rained down and the building imploded.

“Enough!” Ferus finally cried. He laid Luke’s body out on a narrow cot, then lowered himself to the edge, resting a hand on the boy’s shoulder. Only then did he notice that his hand was trembling. “Please, Lune,” he said quietly. “Enough.”

“It’s Div.”

And Ferus nodded, acknowledging that it was true. “I’m sorry for what happened to them,” he said. “And for what’s happened to you.”

“Nothing happened to me.”

Ferus sighed.

“Don’t,” Div said harshly. “Don’t you dare judge *me*. So I’m different from the kid you remember? Look at *you*. Those people we used to be? They’re gone. Erased. Whatever it takes to survive, right? That’s what makes you and me special. Not the lightsaber, not the Force. We’re survivors. Whatever it takes.”

The words were proud, but the tone was ashamed. Ferus lowered his head. Lune was just trying to wound him, Ferus knew. He was lashing out, angry about the past, angry about having a reminder of all the things he’d worked hard to forget. Angry that Ferus had left in the first place, then had had the temerity to come back. They were just words.

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But shame flooded him nonetheless. The truth hurt.

Luke opened his eyes. The world was blurry. “What happened?” Gradually, the blurs of color before him resolved themselves into faces. Ferus and Div peered down at him, wearing curiously similar expressions.

“You passed out,” Div said, then hesitated. He locked eyes with Ferus, and for several moments, a heavy silence settled between them. “You must have hit your head harder than you thought,” Div said. “In the ship.”

Luke rubbed the spot where his head had slammed into the bulkhead. He felt a small lump, painful to the touch. Still, something seemed off. “My head doesn’t hurt that much,” he said dubiously.

“Head injuries can be tricky,” Ferus said quickly, helping him off the cot. “All the more reason to return to the Rebel Base. And quickly. We have work to do.”

“Work? What do you mean?”

Ferus and Div exchanged another of those mysterious glances. Luke wondered how long he’d been out and what had happened between the two of them. It was as if they’d known each other for years rather than minutes.

“That ship you commandeered was on a rendezvous course with an Imperial Star Destroyer,” Ferus explained.

“I noticed,” Luke said, rubbing the lump on his head again. If they hadn’t escaped in time...Speaking of which...“What were you doing in a TIE fighter?” Luke asked suddenly. “And how’d you find us? And—”

“It’s a long story,” Ferus said. “And I can tell you on the way. Right now all you need to know is that the pilot of that ship—the one who kidnapped you, Div—was an agent of Darth Vader. The information he gathered is crucial to the Rebel cause. To you in particular, Luke. It’s the key to saving your life...and, if we’re lucky, to ending Vader’s.”



## Chapter Seven

It had been foolish to hope that Leia would be happy to see him. Ferus knew that.

But he'd hoped anyway.

Was it his destiny to seemingly disappoint everyone he cared about?

It was so good to see Lune again—*Div*, he reminded himself. And to see him with Luke and Leia, as if the Force itself was drawing them together, readying them for the fight to come.

But it was also unsettling. Years before, Ferus had worked hard to bring Jedi and Force-sensitives together, to draw them out of hiding, prepare them for battle. Obi-Wan had warned him against it, had said it was too soon. (Just as he now said, from beyond the grave, that it was too soon to alert Luke and Leia to their destiny.) But Ferus had gone forward anyway—and they had all died.

Was it all happening again? Was the Rebel Alliance just another doomed resistance? Were Luke and Leia marked for death, or worse?

*No*, Ferus thought, stepping into the Rebel briefing room, readying himself to face the Rebel leadership. *It's different this time. It has to be.* Two decades earlier, a preliminary version of the

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Death Star had destroyed the kernels of a resistance movement—and nearly everyone Ferus trusted and valued.

But *this* time, Luke had destroyed the Death Star.

The tables were turning. Ferus and Obi-Wan had waited a long time. But Ferus sensed that their wait was almost at an end. He knew well that what felt like instinct could easily be wishful thinking, desire overwhelming good sense. But nonetheless, he needed to believe that this time, they would win.

They would survive.

The Rebel leaders sat at a long table, watching him expectantly: General Rieekan, General Dodonna, Wedge Antilles. Luke, flanked by Leia and his friend Han. Ferus had watched carefully as Leia saw Luke, safe and sound, for the first time. He saw the tears of relief welling in her eyes, and noticed how quickly and surely she wiped them away. He saw that she was still reluctant to leave Luke's side, as if determined to keep him safe, no matter what it took.

*They deserve to know*, he thought. *Orphaned children, alone in the galaxy. They deserve to know they are family.*

But even without the truth, it was obvious they still had each other. Some part of them must have known the truth.

Div slouched against a wall in the back of the room. Ferus had requested his presence, and the Rebel leaders had agreed. Div had been slightly harder to convince. But in the end, he had stayed.

"I've spent the last two months tracking Darth Vader's actions," Ferus explained to the assembled group. It had been a difficult task. If he ventured too near, Vader would surely sense his presence and the game would be up. So he'd shadowed the Dark Lord from afar, searching desperately for some clue to his agenda—and some way to foil it. He'd arrived on the Star Destroyer in a TIE fighter equipped with an illegal hyperdrive—his escape route. Keeping the elaborate modifications secret meant keeping the TIE under his sole control. This was the only reason he'd made sure to be behind the controls when the

fighters were scrambled. If he hadn't been there, Luke would have flown straight into the Empire's arms. Only luck had saved him. And they couldn't count on luck to do it again. "And among other things, I've learned that Vader has become very interested in an Imperial commander named Rezi Soresh."

"I've never heard of him," General Dodonna said.

"Not surprising," Ferus said. "Soresh keeps a low profile. He's a master bureaucrat—just shuffling flimsiplast, to all appearances. But he's managed to amass a surprising amount of power, and he's ambitious for more. He has a new plan for currying favor with the Emperor: killing the pilot who destroyed the Death Star."

Every head in the room turned toward Luke.

"Soresh is the man who hired the assassin you know as X-7," Ferus continued.

In the back of the room, Div shifted his weight. It was his only reaction to the words. His face remained blank, his eyes facing forward. But Ferus could sense the shame rolling off him in waves. *He told himself he wasn't working for the Empire*, Ferus observed. *He's been lying to himself for too long, and now it hurts to face the truth.*

He would have borne that pain himself if he could have. But it was Div's burden—and it might be exactly what he needed.

"X-7 has dropped off the radar," Ferus continued. "Even Soresh has lost track of him. But Vader is on his tail. He has agents sweeping the galaxy for any record of his attempts on Luke's life, anyone he may have hired..."

Now the faces turned to look at Div. Ferus nodded. "Yes. Lune Divinian is Vader's last link to X-7. That Firespray's files contain all the information Vader's agent has been able to collect on X-7. He was on his way to deliver that—and Div—to Vader."

"I don't understand," Leia said. "Why does Vader care what this Soresh is up to? And why is he so determined to find X-7?"

"That's still unclear," Ferus said, although he was increasingly sure he knew exactly what Vader was up to. And it terrified him.

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According to Ferus's sources, Vader had learned that Luke was the one who'd destroyed the Death Star. He'd made it a priority to hunt down the Rebel pilot himself—and had made it clear to his men that Luke was *not* to be killed.

It sent a chill up Ferus's spine. Because if Vader was keeping Luke alive, it could mean he knew who Luke really was.

And had plans for him.

"What we do know is that X-7, Soresh, and Vader are all bound together—and I believe if we can find X-7 before they do, we might be able to use him."

"We can find him," Luke said confidently. "We just need the right bait. And obviously—"

"No!" Leia exclaimed. She turned to Luke. "It's too dangerous."

"I can handle it, Leia," Luke said, visibly annoyed.

"I'm not saying you can't handle it. I'm saying it's a foolish risk."

"It's a *worthwhile* risk. *You'd* want to do it."

Ferus cut in. "It's the wrong strategy," he explained. "We don't want to draw X-7 into an attack. We certainly don't want to *kill* him."

"Who's *we*?" Han drawled. "Because trust me, I want to—"

"As I say, we want to *use* him," Ferus said, pressing on. "The records on the Firespray indicate that X-7 is trying to hunt down traces of his former identity, from before he was inducted into the Imperial assassin program. He remembers none of it, and he's been completely wiped from the system. But what if he *were* to find some clues to his past? And what if those clues gave him reason to despise the Empire as much as we do? What if instead of killing X-7, we could *turn* him to our side—against the Empire?"

General Rieekan shook his head. "Something like that would require extensive access to Imperial computer systems. I'm not sure we have the resources to spare."

## STAR WARS: Trapped

Ferus smiled. Little did they know they were looking at one of the best slicers in the galaxy. Long ago, before Alderaan, before he'd turned himself into an invisible man, he'd been a galaxy-class slicer, specializing in creating false identities. "That won't be a problem," Ferus said. "But in my experience—"

"Your experience as a botanist and courtier?" Leia asked, raising her eyebrows.

"I wasn't always a botanist, Your Highness," he said. "I know about creating false pasts, for men who need them. And I can tell you that just as the best lies always contain a kernel of truth, the best false identities are always based on real ones. Especially when time is short. What we need is an identity to appropriate, a man around X-7's age who died or disappeared a decade ago. Just at the moment when X-7 entered the Empire's program. Someone whose entire family was destroyed by the Empire, someone with reason to want revenge. Perhaps someone with a single remaining relative who can fill in a few carefully selected blanks."

"That's a pretty specific order," General Dodonna said.

"Yes," Ferus said evenly, swallowing the emotion that threatened to consume him. "It is."

Div gave him a look of pure disgust. Then he turned his back on the proceedings and left. Ferus had known that Div would catch on.

And he knew that the younger man wouldn't be easily convinced.

"We give X-7 the identity he's looking for," Ferus said, careful not to betray his distress. "We tell him exactly what we want him to hear—and unleash him on the Empire."

"You want to brainwash a brainwashed man?" Leia asked incredulously. "Then turn him into a weapon?"

"He's already been turned into a weapon," Ferus pointed out. "We're just pointing him in the right direction."

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Div closed his eyes and tipped his face up to the sun. The chill water of the creek lapped against his bare ankles. The wind whispered through the leaves, making it easy to imagine ghosts peeking through the spindly Massassi branches. But when he opened his eyes, he was totally alone. Just as he wanted it. The clearing was only a kilometer away from the Great Temple that served as the Rebel Base, but the hidden pocket of jungle was so quiet and still he felt like he was the only man on the moon. It was the kind of spot where he could hear himself think.

It was the kind of spot where he could hide forever.

But of course Ferus found him.

Ferus sat beside him, silent. It was another thing that was different about the Jedi after all these years: The Ferus he remembered had been a talkative, joyful man—at least before things had become really bad. Something dark had settled over Ferus after the day he'd watched Darth Vader murder his dearest friend. A shadow across his face, across his heart. In the end, Ferus had fought off the dark side of the Force, and the light had returned to his eyes. But Div wondered if those days had left a permanent scar.

"You can't mean it," Div said finally. "You can't possibly expect that—"

"I do," Ferus said. "I'm sorry."

Div struggled to control his temper. Ferus obviously thought that Div hated him. But that wasn't the case. It was just that seeing Ferus again hurt, and it was a pain he'd tried long and hard to forget. For years, he'd asked himself, *Why couldn't I protect them?* And he'd wondered whether Ferus could have saved them.

But he hadn't been there. And yes, part of him hated Ferus for that. But not as much as he hated himself. For failing.

"I suppose you're going to tell me it's the only option," Div said sourly.

"No." Ferus paused. "Just the best option."

Div exploded. "How is it the best *anything* to abuse Trever's memory like that? And you honestly expect me to go along with

it? For what? To help *them*?” He jerked his head at the path that led back to the Rebel barracks. “You think Trever would want that?”

Ferus tilted his head. “Trever risked his life for this cause, time and time again. He died for it.” He swallowed hard. “Using his identity in this way...it could give his death meaning.”

“Nothing can give his death meaning,” Div shot back angrily. “All death is meaningless.”

“And all life?” Ferus asked mildly. “Is that the next logical conclusion?”

Div didn’t respond. He remembered this from his childhood, the Jedi way—small, innocent questions designed to guide you to one big answer. Ferus always liked to claim he wasn’t a *real* Jedi—after all, he’d left the order as a teenager, before becoming a Jedi Master. He’d given up that life and spent nearly a decade living as an ordinary man. But from where Div was sitting, Ferus was just like the rest of them—sure of his own wisdom, sure he was right. Full of secrets. Whatever the technicalities, Div thought, Ferus was a Jedi.

It wasn’t a compliment.

“This won’t work without your cooperation,” Ferus said. “But I didn’t come out here to convince you.” He stood up, brushing the dirt off his clothes. He’d borrowed the ill-fitting shirt from General Dodonna. It was strange to see him dressed as a Rebel soldier—nearly as strange as it had been to see him in Imperial garb. “The choice is yours, Div.” He patted Div on the shoulder. And as much as he wanted to, Div didn’t squirm away. “I trust you. I always have.”

*Maybe you shouldn’t,* Div thought as Ferus left him. *You trusted me to look after Trever, and look how that worked out.*

It had been a long time since anyone had trusted him, and since he’d dared trust anyone else. Trusting people was the kind of thing that got you dead in a hurry. And letting other people trust you was nearly as dangerous. It meant their lives were your

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responsibility—and so were their deaths. It was easier to be alone.

But once Ferus was gone, Div grew disgusted by his own company. He started back toward the Rebel camp. Midway, Luke appeared, his little astromech droid in tow.

Luke waved, grinning. “Glad I found you!”

“You were looking for me?” Div asked, instantly cautious. The Rebels seemed to have lost interest in locking him up now that they had all the information they needed on this X-7. But Div hadn’t forgotten that before that day, he’d been a prisoner on this moon.

And he suspected that Luke hadn’t forgotten that Div had once tried to kill him.

Luke drew his lightsaber and activated the beam.

Div tensed, ready to leap out of the way. He’d seen Luke handle the weapon. His efforts were clumsy, hesitant. Div could disarm him. Probably.

“I come out here to practice sometimes,” Luke said. “More privacy, you know?”

“Uh, yeah.” Div felt like a fool.

“Back on Kamino, you saved my life with this thing,” Luke said, lifting the lightsaber. “Like you’d been using it your whole life.”

Div shrugged. “Like I say, just something I picked up.”

“Well, I was kind of hoping...” Luke reddened. “You think you could teach me some moves?”

“What?”

“It’s no big deal,” Luke said quickly. “I just figured...I don’t really have anyone else who can show me how to use this thing.”

*That’s what you think,* Div thought. He didn’t understand why Ferus was so determined not to tell Luke the truth. Why not start training him as a Jedi *now*, before it was too late?

*Like it’s too late for me.*

“Sounds great,” Div said. “I could use the exercise.”



It wasn't exercise he needed. It was distraction. Pushing himself to the point of exhaustion, and past it. This was perfect.

"Think of the lightsaber as an extension of your body," he said, repeating the advice he'd been given by the Jedi Ry-Gaul and Garen Muln. "Always be aware of its position, but never watch your blade—you watch your *enemy*. Your focus has to be narrow and wide, all at once."

Div showed him Shii-Cho, the first of the seven Jedi fighting forms. He taught Luke the basics, thrust and parry, lunge and deflect. Div cringed as Luke ran through his velocity drills looking like a child waving a stick. But he would learn. Form III, Soresu, was more advanced, but Luke had already figured out many of the basic laserblast-deflection techniques. His movements were still too loose and ranging, making him a wide target for incoming blasts.

Every time Div used the lightsaber to demonstrate, it was more difficult to hand it back. His body remembered all the moves, effortlessly falling into old habits. But it wasn't just the fighting techniques, or the deadly efficiency of the blade.

A lightsaber wasn't just another weapon. Using it, even for practice, meant connecting with the Force. There was no other way to achieve the balance, the necessary equilibrium of stillness and motion. Wielding the lightsaber meant opening himself up to everything he'd shut out these last several years. It meant unlocking a door in his mind that he'd thought was sealed forever.

It was tempting to believe that it wasn't. Ferus seemed to believe that Luke could begin his training even as an adult—contrary to everything Div knew about Jedi traditions. So why couldn't Div return to his training, reclaim the skills of his youth, fulfill the destiny everyone had foreseen for him?

Even if he'd wanted it, Div felt sure it wouldn't work. Being a Jedi meant opening oneself up to the Force. It meant having trust. It required a degree of blind faith, of innocence, that Div

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had long since lost the capability to feel. He wasn't willing to let that vulnerability—that *weakness*—back into himself.

"Like this?" Luke asked, executing a perfect riposte-counterparry combination. He spun around, bouncing lightly on the balls of his feet, slashing the lightsaber across a bough of the nearest Massassi tree with startling accuracy. Not that Div was about to reveal that he was impressed.

"That's great...as long as your enemy moves no faster than a tree," Div said. "Again!"

Luke swept through the training exercise again, and again, blade flashing, eyes lit with determination. Div couldn't help remembering his own training, many years ago. Hiding out on an asteroid with all those proud warriors, so eager for the day when he would be big enough to fight by their side. They had died for him, all of them. Gave him their one escape pod. Watched him disappear into space and waited to die. Safe in his pod, Div had watched as the Imperials had aimed their terrible weapon at the asteroid and erased it from existence.

All those people, giving up their lives so that Div could escape—so that the galaxy's "only hope" would survive.

*All that, and it wasn't me after all,* Div thought as Luke slashed and leapt and spun, striving for perfection. *But what if it's him?*

## Chapter Eight

**B**elazura was a sewer.

According to the records, the planet had once been a popular vacation spot, its long stretches of white sandy beaches calling tourists from all over the Inner Rim. X-7 had scanned the holopics in disgust. All that land, wasted on useless pursuits. Pale bodies stretching out under the three suns. Children splashing in the surf. And behind them, acres of lush green hills, cluttered with roaming herds of wilter-beasts and hairy bronaks.

The inefficiency of it was criminal—or should have been, at least.

X-7 climbed out of his Howlrunner and looked around with satisfaction. It was an open-air spaceport, left over from the old days, when it would have afforded views of the sparkling coastlines and blooming hills. Those were all gone now, thanks to the Empire. The hills had been stripped as 11-17 miner droids probed the earth beneath for valuable varmigio and mutonium. Derricks and power generators dotted the water as far as the eye could see. The water itself had turned nearly black with runoff from the factories lining the coast; the three suns were barely visible through the thick haze of brown smog. X-7 took a deep,

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appreciative breath. That foul stench was the perfume of civilization.

The people of Belazura had plenty to thank the Empire for. Before the Imperials arrived, Belazurans had been useless fools whose skills were limited to serving tropical drinks and pulling flailing Phindians out of the surf. But the Empire had put them to work in the mines and the factories, turned them into productive galactic citizens.

Though none of them looked very happy about it.

Except for periodic convoys of Imperial troop carriers, the narrow streets of Belazura's capital city were nearly deserted. Small wonder, as every able-bodied man and woman was either at work or asleep. But those who couldn't work—the aged, the infirm, the very young—shuffled down the sidewalks, heads down, shoulders hunched. X-7 had no hope that anyone here would recognize him from his past; Project Omega had rebuilt his facial structure. But even if he'd worn the same face as this Trevor Flume, there seemed little chance that any of these Belazurans would even dare look at him.

X-7 had followed the trail of information as far as it would take him. It had taken him here. Soresh's codes had provided access to an encrypted Imperial network that had revealed all he could ever want to know about Project Omega. How its unwilling recruits were culled from prisoners whose families thought they were dead. How their brains were wiped. How they were molded into slaves of the Empire, convinced that they had been volunteers. How the records of their past were wiped from the system.

But information wasn't nearly as easy to erase as most people thought. It had been well buried, but X-7 had found it—little more than a name, Trevor Flume. Captured on Belazura at age eighteen, shipped off to Project Omega, where he became its most successful graduate. Code name: X-7.

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That was it, the dead end. So X-7 had stolen himself a Howlrunner and flown to Belazura. He wasn't leaving until he'd found some answers.

The simplest way to track down information would have been to report to the Imperial liaison at the spaceport. But X-7 needed to stay off the Imperial radar. And likely some kind of fail-safe trigger in the system existed, designed to red-flag anyone who came looking for answers about Trevor Flume.

Instead, he decided to begin his search for the past in a more obvious place: Trevor Flume's home.

*My home?* he wondered, staring at the decrepit, crumbling structure that had been Flume's last known address. The two-story house was falling apart: peeling paint, rusted siding, broken generator. Its windows were boarded up, Rebel graffiti scrawled across them in fading reds and blues. It was abandoned; that was clear.

X-7 closed his eyes, trying to force a memory. But the flashbacks always came when he least expected and least desired them. When he was *trying* to remember, his mind stayed blank.

"You don't belong around here."

X-7 whirled around, furious with himself that he hadn't heard the Arconan approaching. By instinct, his hand flashed toward his blaster—but he stopped himself. The Arconan's anvil-shaped head was shriveled with age, his marble-like eyes milky and unfocused. Despite his hostile glare, there was no chance he'd be a threat. *Let it play out*, X-7 thought. *I can always kill him later.*

He adopted a mild, harmless expression. Project Omega might have stripped him of the ability to *experience* human emotion, but he was remarkably good at imitating it. "I'm looking for the family that used to live here," he said. "They're old friends of mine, and since I'm passing through town, I thought I'd catch up."

The Arconan looked around at the crumbling buildings and cratered street. "No one just *passes through* this part of town."

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*Patience*, X-7 cautioned himself, itching for his blaster. He'd make this being talk, one way or another. But it would be smartest to do so without attracting unwanted attention. The street might be empty, but he could see plenty of windows with a perfect view. Anyone could be lurking behind the transparisteel.

"I'm in Belazura on business, and—"

"Imperial business?" the Arconan said, now even more suspicious. "Haven't you people done enough? What now? You want to torture their ghosts?"

"Does that mean you knew them?" X-7 asked eagerly. "The Flumes?"

"What's it to you?"

"I told you, I'm an old friend."

The Arconan sneered. "Right. An old friend who came by to say hello after all these years. Except I tell you they're dead and you don't even blink. So how about you tell me what you *really* want?"

"Money," X-7 said without hesitation. "What else does anyone want?"

"They owe you?" the Arconan asked.

"Big-time."

The Arconan made a strange sound, like a dianoga choking on a lump of sewage. X-7 suddenly realized he was laughing. "Good luck getting them to pay you back now!" he chortled. But quickly, he sobered up. "You want some help tracking down what's left of Flume's people? It's going to cost you."

Again, X-7 swallowed his irritation. This Arconan didn't know how close he was to death. "How much?"

"Fifty."

"Twenty," X-7 countered.

"Fifty."

"Thirty," X-7 offered.

"Fifty."

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He was too impatient to negotiate. Money was nothing to him. He threw a handful of it at the alien. "That's half. Give me the address, and I'll hand over the other half."

The Arconan complied, giving him an address on the fringes of town.

"If this information is inaccurate, I'll be back for you," X-7 said coolly. Now he finally withdrew the blaster from its holster.

"Oh, it's accurate," the alien said, laughing again. "You'll find what's left of them, for all the good it will do you."

X-7 wasn't looking to do himself good. He was looking for answers. After that, who knew? Maybe he would reclaim his old identity and learn to be human again, weak and pathetic.

Or maybe he would track down every last Flume, kill them all, and be done with this mess forever.

*The rest of them, X-7 thought sourly. Perfect.*

The Arconan hadn't lied. Not technically, at least. Presumably whatever was left of Trever Flume's family was here—underground. Beneath the crooked tombstones. At the edge of an old graveyard, weeds spouting between the mounds of dirt.

*Trever Flume.*

*Clive Flax.*

*Astri Divinian.*

They didn't share a name, but the epitaphs—*loving brother, loving mother, loving father*—made it clear they were a family. *Love*. It put a bad taste in his mouth.

There was something about the last name *Divinian*. Something familiar. Could it mean he was on the right track? X-7 stared at the graves, trying to feel something. "My parents," he said aloud, testing the phrase on his tongue. It felt wrong.

"Trever," he tried next. "My name is Trever."

Each of the three graves had "*Gone never. Here forever,*" the standard Belazuran mourning cry, etched across the top.

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Each was marked by a bouquet of nahtival flowers. The flowers were fresh; *someone* was tending to these graves.

X-7 paced quickly to the entrance of the graveyard, where a hunched Belazuran had been hacking at the ground with a rusty shovel. He was still there, now sliding a tombstone into the shallow hole.

"Who's been here today?" X-7 asked harshly.

The weary Belazuran looked at him blankly.

"Today!" X-7 shouted. "Someone put fresh flowers on those graves." He gestured toward the Divinian plots. "Who was it?"

The man nodded slowly. "That's right, he did come by today. Didn't expect him."

X-7 grabbed the man's shoulders and gave him a brutal shake. "Him *who*, you mudcrutch?"

"The boy," the man said in a dreamy voice. "Of course, he's not a boy anymore, is he? Time's passing, it is. Slow, fast, it just keeps going. Yesterday we're a republic, today we're an empire, tomorrow—"

"The boy," X-7 growled.

"A man now," the Belazuran said. "Thought I wouldn't recognize him, but I did, didn't I? Looks just like his mother. Astri was a beauty, that one."

So Trevor had a brother. There had been a suspicious lack of information about Trevor's family in the files, as if it had been purposefully blotted out. But this was better than a file; this was a living relative, in the flesh. In reach. *If* the man could focus long enough to spill the details. *He'll tell me what I need*, X-7 thought with determination. *Even if I have to cut it out of him.*

"Lucky boy," the old man said. "Don't know why he doesn't spend more time in that house. Not many lucky enough to have an ocean view, not these days."

"I was just at Flume's house," X-7 snapped. "No one's living there. It's falling apart."

"Falling apart?" The man shook his head. "It was fine yesterday, in perfect condition. Perfect condition the day before."



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Walk past it every day on my way home, I do. Don't know why they kept it as a summerhouse. If it were my house, I'd live in it year-round, day in, day out, I would. But not them. Two months a year, in and out. Never made much sense to me."

"Where is it?" X-7 asked harshly. "Where's this summerhouse?"

The grave tender narrowed his eyes, suddenly suspicious. "Why do *you* want to know?"

X-7 sighed. Of course the senile Belazuran chose *now* to come out of his daze. X-7 didn't have the patience for deception or persuasion. He lashed out with lightning speed, grabbing the man by the neck. Then he squeezed. "Tell me where the house is. Or die."

The man gasped, trying desperately to draw in breath. His hands hammered at X-7's arm, but the blows were as negligible as tesfli piercer bites. "Time's running out," X-7 said. "I'm sure I can obtain the information somewhere else—but I won't be very happy about it." He squeezed tighter.

The man's eyes bulged. He wheezed something inaudible.

"What's that?" X-7 relaxed his grip very slightly.

"The Fallows, beyond the city, along the water. The blue house, you can't miss it," he gasped. "Please. Please don't kill me."

It would take minimal effort to squeeze just a bit tighter, to cut off the man's air entirely. That way he wouldn't be able to tell anyone about the strange man who'd come around asking questions; he wouldn't be able to warn the brother. It made sense. That was the rule: When in doubt, kill.

But he didn't do it. Something strange stilled his hand. *Mercy?*

The thought repulsed him. Enraged, he slammed a fist into the grave tender's head, hard enough to guarantee he wouldn't be warning anyone anytime soon. The grave tender crumpled to the ground. And X-7 set off in search of his past.

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He scaled the exterior of the house and perched on a ledge beside a large picture window. The ledge was only a few centimeters wide, but he was in no danger of losing his balance. The fogged transparisteel offered an imperfect view of the living room. But he could make out the figure pattering around inside. He could have just knocked on the door. But he was no fool. If this was a trap, he wasn't about to walk straight into it. Recon first, then action.

The man kept his face away from the window.

*Turn around, X-7 ordered him silently. Show me who you are.*

As if in reaction to the silent command, the man turned. X-7 stiffened in surprise. He'd seen that face before. Not in a half-remembered flash of childhood. Less than a month before, on an arid moon, accepting a mission to kill Luke Skywalker. The man was a mercenary pilot, one of the best, by the name of Lune—

*Divinian!* he suddenly remembered. As in *Astri Divinian*. It wasn't like him to forget those kinds of details. That was the sort of mistake that could get you killed. The sort of mistake that would lead you straight into a trap.

Because the odds against that man being his brother? Astronomical. There was a much more likely possibility.

X-7 gritted his teeth, furious that he'd allowed himself to be misled. This Divinian obviously had some kind of ax to grind. Perhaps he was still angry to have lost out on his payment when the Kamino mission went sour. Whatever the reason, he'd decided to come after X-7. To play with his mind, his emotions.

Bad mistake.

Recon was over, X-7 decided. Time for action.

He hurled himself through the window. Lune Divinian flung his hands over his face, shielding himself from the hail of transparisteel. And all traces of mercy wiped away, X-7 lunged for his throat.

## Chapter Nine

The thunder of stormtrooper boots was growing louder, closer. Han dragged Leia around the corner, but the corridor dead-ended a few meters away. No cover, no escape. They pressed themselves against the wall, held their breath, and hoped.

A phalanx of stormtroopers stomped down the hall-way, feet rising and falling in unison. As they swept past, Han whispered into the comlink, cupping his hands around it to block the noise. “A little more warning next time?”

“It’s all clear now,” Luke’s voice assured him. “You have a straight shot to the records room. Two guards at the door, and you’re in. Easy.”

“Sure, easy for *you*,” Han muttered. “You’re not the one in here making friends with the boys in white.”

“What’s that?”

“Nothing, kid. In and out. We’ll get those blueprints to you faster than a neck.” Han glowered at the comlink. Bad enough he was infiltrating an Imperial administrative center with only the kid’s help to guide him through. Even worse that Leia had insisted on coming, too. Which meant that if there was trouble—make that *when* there was trouble—he couldn’t just save his own neck. He’d have to save hers, too. It was his responsibility.

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*Except none of this is my responsibility,* he thought irritably. *So what am I doing here?*

Div had agreed to go along with Ferus's plan, but he'd demanded something in return: a Rebel attack on Belazura's Imperial garrison. The garrison was the center of Imperial power on the planet, but it was also a valuable strategic asset for the Empire. At the heart of the Inner Rim, it gave them a perfect base to control the surrounding planetary systems. Dark rumors swirled about the weaponry housed there. Belazura was packed with Imperial factories and arms manufactures, and several of the latest prototypes were said to be stored in the garrison. It was one of the reasons the citizens of Belazura were thoroughly cowed by their Imperial rulers. And one of the reasons it had long sat toward the top of the Rebels' target list.

The garrison was built on the spot where Div's entire family had died.

So Han understood why Div wanted it gone. He knew why the Rebels had decided to go along with Div and plan a strike. He was less clear about why he'd agreed to go along, much less volunteered for this recon mission. The garrison's blueprints were considered so valuable that they weren't stored in the computer system. Instead, only one hard copy existed, and it was housed in the basement of the Imperial administration center. Leia had appointed herself the one to retrieve it.

So here he was, by her side.

Han wasn't a big fan of whys. It didn't matter *why* he was here. All that mattered was getting in, getting the blueprints, and getting out. Both of them.

"Luke says go now," he told Leia. R2-D2 had managed to tap into the security systems. He'd disabled the security alerts and holocams. Now Luke could see what was happening inside the building, but he was the only one. Luke was monitoring from beyond the perimeter, guiding them through safely. Supposedly.

Han and Leia ran soundlessly down the corridor, turning right at the third corner. And as promised, only two

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stormtroopers stood guarding the door. They fumbled with their blasters as Han and Leia appeared in the hallway.

But Han was faster. Laserfire burst from his blaster, and the stormtrooper on the right went down. The other dropped at nearly the same instant. Leia pocketed her smoking blaster pistol. Han shook his head in appreciation. The princess might have an attitude—but she also had perfect aim.

“Ready?” Leia asked, preparing the detonite charge that would blow open the locked door.

Han nodded and raised his blaster. There were no security holocams in the basement records room, which meant they were going in blind. He was ready, all right. Ready for anything.

Except for the door exploding *out* toward them before Leia even had a chance to plant the charge. Han and Leia flew backward, slamming hard into the wall. Their blasters clattered out of their hands.

Han lifted himself up. He shook his head and blinked hard, hoping he was seeing double. Maybe triple.

But the vision was real. A line of stormtroopers emerged from the dark basement and opened fire.

“Han!” Luke shouted into the comlink, starting to panic. “Leia! Han! What’s going on?” But the comlink broadcast nothing but shouting and explosions. Luke was certain that amid the chaos, he heard Leia scream.

“Chewie! Come on—we’re going in!” Luke cried, already springing into motion. He’d been monitoring the mission from a hidden spot by the freight entrance while Chewbacca waited nearby with the landspeeder, ready to take off at a moment’s notice. The Wookiee didn’t hesitate.

He threw himself against the door, which gave way like it was made of flimsiplast. Luke and Chewbacca barreled down the hallway. Luke led the way, the building’s twisting corridors engraved in his mind. Not that it was difficult to find their way to the basement; all they had to do was follow the noise. Laserfire

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pings, shouts, grunts, explosions, and, again, something that sounded terrifyingly like Leia's scream.

They rounded the corner. Stormtrooper bodies littered the corridor. Han and Leia were battling their way through a storm of plastoid armor and laserfire. Smoke billowed through the hallway, giving their faces a gray, sickly pallor. Han aimed his weapon at one of the stormtroopers, but nothing happened. Luke realized he was out of ammo.

"Han, heads up!" he shouted, and without thinking, tossed his blaster over to his friend. Han jumped up and snatched it out of the air, then began firing again before his feet touched the ground.

Chewbacca's bowcaster was of little use in such a cramped space, but the Wookiee didn't hesitate to charge into the fight. He grabbed the stormtrooper closest to Leia and twisted his blaster into a knot with one hand as he slammed the trooper against the wall with the other.

Luke took it all in, even as he tried desperately to disarm the stormtroopers with his lightsaber. *Loose grip, firm shoulders, don't lean too hard to the right*, he thought, trying to remember all the advice Div had given him. He bent his knees slightly and tried to remember the first form—but was he supposed to parry before thrust, or thrust before parry? A blast of laserfire whizzing past his ear knocked him out of his confusion. *Stop trying to be a Jedi warrior*, he told himself. *Just stay alive*. Forgetting about form and technique and strategy, he hacked blindly with the lightsaber, letting the glowing blade guide his hands. The stormtrooper dropped to the ground.

*Yes!* Luke thought. Then he saw Han standing behind the fallen trooper, a smoking blaster in his hands. "Thanks for the loaner," he said, hoisting it at Luke like he was toasting a glass of lum. "Consider us even."

It was the last of the stormtroopers. But surely more would be on the way. While Leia and Chewbacca covered the corridor, Luke and Han raced down into the records room. They tore

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through the files, searching for the garrison blueprints. Finally, Han shouted in triumph. “Got it!” he said, brandishing a data chip. “Let’s go.”

They ran up the steps. Once at the top, Luke tossed a fragmentation grenade into the records room and slammed the door behind it. A moment later, they heard a muffled explosion. The Imperials would know they’d been here—but they would never know what the Rebels were trying to steal.

Footsteps pounded down the hallway. Their time was up. Luke led the way out of the building, but when they broke through to open air, they stopped cold.

Their landspeeder was gone.

“This way!” Luke shouted, catching sight of a few Imperial scout speeder bikes parked nearby. They raced toward them.

“Stop right there, you Rebel scum!” a stormtrooper shouted.

Laserfire shot past them. Running flat out toward the bikes, Luke twisted around and fired over his shoulder. The stormtrooper dived for cover. A second one had joined him, a blaster rifle in each hand.

Chewbacca reached the speeder bikes first and looked at them dubiously. They were narrow repulsorlift vehicles designed for a single rider. Handlebars for steering, foot pedals for speed and altitude, and no margin for error. The Wookiee growled something at Han, waving his furry arms in the air. Han shoved him toward the closest bike. “It’ll hold you,” Han said quickly. “Trust me.” He hopped onto one of his own and lifted off. The Wookiee let out a mournful sigh, but he trusted Han. He jumped onto the bike and started the engine. It wobbled slightly, its repulsorlifts struggling to support the Wookiee’s weight, but then the engine roared and the bike shot forward.

There was only one bike left.

“I said *stop!*” the stormtrooper shouted.

“I’ll drive,” Leia said, yanking Luke toward the bike. “You shoot.”

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They climbed on together and lifted off, thrusters on full. Luke straddled the bike and wrapped one arm around Leia's waist, using the other to fire back at the storm-troopers, who were fumbling with the door of a small storage shed off the side of the main administrative building.

Luke quickly understood why. The shed contained more speeder bikes. The stormtroopers were giving chase.

"Faster!" Luke urged Leia. "We have to get out of here!"

"Gee, thanks for the great idea," Leia drawled. But the bike accelerated. The city turned into a grayish smear as they sped away from the dense center and out toward the corridor of factories along the coastline. Luke turned back and fired another barrage of laserfire. The stormtroopers swooped out of the way. One of them veered straight into the path of an oncoming troop carrier. It exploded on impact.

Luke grabbed Leia tighter as the shock wave slammed into them. The bike lurched forward and dropped several feet. Luke's stomach rocketed into his throat. But he kept firing. And Leia never flinched at the controls. She made a sharp turn into a narrow passageway, trying to lose the remaining stormtrooper in a zigzag of alleys. But the bike behind them drew closer and closer, and Leia had pushed the thrusters as far as they would go. They shot toward a narrow spit of land bounded by sea on one side and by a murky bay of toxic runoff from the nearby factories on the other.

The stormtrooper fired his bike's blaster cannon. The beam of laserfire pinged off the main battery of Luke's speeder. The speeder shuddered and lurched precariously to the side. Luke, who was holding on with only one hand, lost his balance. The bike tilted further, dumping him off the seat. He scrabbled for purchase but felt himself slipping. They weren't very high off the ground, but if he hit at this speed...He was dangling half off the bike, and as it tipped further, he lost his grip completely.

"Hold on!" Leia shouted, grasping his hand.



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Luke dangled in midair. She couldn't hoist him up, not with one hand. It was hard enough to steer while holding on to him. And impossible to fire at the approaching stormtrooper.

Desperate, Luke had an idea. "Fly over the bay!" Luke shouted up to her, hoping she'd hear him over the roar of the engines. He held tight as she steered toward the toxic water. He winced as his body slammed into the bike, buffeted by the wind. They were flying so low that his toes skimmed the water. There was a sizzling noise and a trail of smoke as the toxic liquid ate away at his shoe. Luke yanked his legs out of the way and gripped Leia's hand tighter. He tried not to look down.

He still had his blaster, which meant he had a chance. Wind tore at his body, trying to rip it from Leia's grip. The stormtrooper was firing relentlessly, his shots coming closer and closer to the mark. He didn't have much time. And it was nearly impossible to aim, dangling by one hand as he shot forward at two hundred kilometers an hour.

But Luke was sure of one thing: He could hit any target at any speed. He blocked out the wind, the bubbling toxic sludge, the hail of laserfire.

He squeezed the trigger.

Direct hit. The Imperial's primary drive motor exploded in a shower of sparks, and the bike began spinning out of control. The stormtrooper went flying into the soupy lake of toxic waste. He landed with a loud splash, thrashing and flailing in the bubbling iridescent water. But soon he slipped below, the white armor disappearing into the deep. Luke shuddered.

A few more seconds, a little less luck, and it could have been him.

Leia helped him climb back aboard the bike. The engine thrummed beneath him. Leia was shaking. Luke took a deep breath, steadying himself. "Let's go," he suggested, trying his best not to look at the toxic soup swirling beneath him. "Meet up with the others and start planning phase two."

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“Let’s just hope it goes better than phase one,” Leia said, turning toward the rendezvous point.

“Couldn’t go worse,” Luke pointed out.

Leia twisted around to give him a wry smile. “You know what Han would say to that.”

Luke was pretty sure he did. And he had to admit, for once, the pilot was probably right. “Things can always get worse.”

## Chapter Ten

**X**-7 closed his fingers around the enemy's neck and squeezed. He would throttle the life out of this imposter. Punish him for daring to believe he could fool X-7. That level of idiocy deserved death. Div gasped for air as red bloomed across his cheeks—blood vessels, bursting in the struggle for oxygen.

The enemy jerked his hands up in a reverse Moravian maneuver. X-7 toppled backward, and the enemy was on him in a heartbeat. They rolled across the carpet, knocking over a synthstone table. Dishes and glasses clattered to the ground, shattering on impact. X-7 raised an arm to protect himself against the spray of jagged fragments. But his enemy grabbed a wrist and flipped X-7 onto his back.

As he fell, X-7 hooked his leg behind his foe's and brought him down, too. But the enemy had seen the move coming, and grabbed a fire poker from the fireplace on his way down. He slammed the durasteel rod down at X-7's face.

X-7 rolled out of the way just in time. He drew his blaster. With lightning speed, the enemy knocked it out of his hand. It skidded across the room, disappearing under a couch.

The enemy was a blur with the poker, lashing and lunging like a master swordsman. Driven by instinct, X-7 reached blindly,

## Alex Wheeler

his hands closing around a curtain rod and ripping it off the wall. Some part of him must have noticed it earlier and filed it away for later use. That was why X-7 was invincible. He fought like a machine. No emotion, no passion. Only speed and observation and power. He moved with grace and without hesitation. He was like a force of nature. He had been bred for battle. He was a deadly weapon.

And yet the enemy matched him. Move for move.

Their makeshift weapons clashed and clanged. X-7 launched an attack, but the enemy countered with a Phr'shan maneuver. A Griggs-Barnay was the next logical move, but instead, X-7 opted for the unexpected, slashing at the enemy with a modified Ptann attack that he had picked up on Tarivo III. The enemy danced backward almost before X-7 had begun to strike, as if he knew what X-7 was going to do even before X-7 himself did.

They were too evenly matched. X-7 needed to regain the advantage. He began consciously to speed up his breathing, as if he were struggling for air. Sweat streamed down his face. "Hold," he gasped, panting. He let the enemy take the offensive and back him further and further across the room. "We need to talk."

The enemy lashed out with the poker. X-7 parried the blow but let his arm sag just a bit. He didn't want to look *too* weak. Just weak enough that it would be believable for him to stop the fight.

"You break into *my* home, attack me without cause or warning, and you expect *me* to take pity on you?" the enemy growled. He pounced on X-7, who shifted his weight and leaned into the attack, using the enemy's momentum to throw him halfway across the room.

"Not pity," X-7 said, dropping into a crouch behind the sofa. His blaster was under there somewhere. If he could just reach it... "But if you're at all curious why I'm here..."

*There!* His hand closed around the blaster. He lodged it into his belt, tucking it beneath his shirt. Then he stood again, arms

out to his sides. "A temporary ceasefire, that's all I'm suggesting. Time for explanations."

The enemy took a few cautious steps toward him, the fire poker lowered to his side. He nodded. "Fine. Explanations. You start."

X-7 could tell when a man's defenses were dropped. It was a predator's instinct, knowing exactly when to strike. "My pleasure," he said. Then raised the blaster, squeezed the trigger, and—somehow, the enemy wasn't there anymore. The blasterfire blew a hole in the wall.

A cold blade pressed against X-7's neck. Warm blood trickled down his skin. The enemy was behind him.

The enemy had proven faster than him. Stronger than him. Smarter than him.

There was a chance he could dislodge the knife, knock the enemy off balance, disarm him, all before the knife plunged deeper and sliced an artery.

X-7 closed his eyes, let the blaster drop to the ground, and waited for the end. He had been bested, and it was no less than he deserved.

But the pressure of the knife dropped away. "*Now* perhaps you're ready to explain what you're doing here."

X-7 whirled around, ready to strike, but the enemy caught his arm before a blow could fall.

"Talk," Lune Divinian said.

It was his only viable option. He wouldn't risk hand-to-hand combat again, not until he found a way to regain the advantage. "Did you really think I would fall for it?" X-7 snarled. "Believe a man like you could be my *brother*?"

The man visibly recoiled. "My brother is dead."

"Your adopted brother, you mean," X-7 said, correcting him.

It was like the man's face turned to durasteel. His expression went completely blank. "What do you know about it?"

There was something strangely familiar about the dull eyes, the toneless voice, but it took X-7 a moment to pin it down.

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Then he realized that it was the same blank and pitiless gaze he saw in the mirror. This was the only man he'd ever met who was able to shut himself down as completely as X-7.

Just as he was the only man X-7 had ever met who could so evenly match him, strength for strength, move to move.

*Is it possible...?*

"I know everything about it," X-7 said, "but that's just what you intended, isn't it? Planted the information for me to find, invented this ridiculous story. You probably didn't even have a brother. This person, this *Trever*—"

Lune Divinian struck him across the face. Hard.

X-7 forced himself not to respond.

"You don't say his name," Lune said. "Ever."

It didn't make sense. If this was all a trap and Lune was behind it, then wouldn't he be welcoming X-7 with open arms? Certainly he could be lying, trying to put X-7 off balance, confuse him. But X-7 had never met the man who could successfully lie to him. People were too emotional, too invested in their own words. X-7 was separate from all that, separate from humanity. The distance allowed him to see behind people's masks, into the rotting truth that lay beneath. And he didn't think that Lune was lying.

He *thought* Lune was telling the truth, but didn't *know*. Wasn't *certain*.

Before, he would have been. Uncertainty wasn't a part of his programming.

Of course, neither was memory. Or curiosity. Or anger.

But X-7 wasn't the man he had once been.

It was proving to be a problem.

## Chapter Eleven

**D**iv let X-7 think it took him some convincing. He looked through X-7's evidence, challenging his story at every turn. Refused to accept that Trever might be alive, standing in front of him.

And then, on the third day, he did. And in the process, X-7 accepted it, too.

Now Div couldn't decide where to rest his eyes. Not on the familiar threadbare couch, a hole on its armrest torn long ago by Trever's rambunctious pet bull worrt. Not on the door to the kitchen, where Astri had so often appeared with a pot of some foul-smelling concoction. She had always tried to recreate her father's recipes, but more times than not, her efforts had resulted in an inedible sludge. Clive had eaten it anyway, a smile fixed on his face. (Apparently love wasn't just blind; it was taste bud-deprived.) But at Trever's suggestion, Div had devised a better system: dumping the sludge into their napkins, then using the Force to float it out of sight.

Div couldn't look at the empty desk that had once been covered by Astri's computer clutter, or the shelves that had once been filled with Clive's collection of exotic Merenzane Gold vintages. The caretaker who came in once a month had managed

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to keep the abandoned house from falling in on itself, but she couldn't stop the dust from collecting. She couldn't turn the house back into a home.

She couldn't clear out the ghosts.

It had been a week. And with each passing day, it grew easier to see those ghosts; it became harder to forget. Which was why he almost couldn't bear to look around the house. But anything would be easier than looking at X-7, who was sitting on Trever's couch, wearing Trever's clothes, flipping through Trever's old collection of Grav-ball trading cards.

X-7 tossed them onto a side table. "I don't understand," he said. "Why would he...I...anyone collect something with no value?"

"For fun," Div said. "It made you happy."

X-7 riffled through a stack of holopics sitting on the table. He picked up one of Trever grinning in front of a shiny new Arrow-23 speeder. It had been his fifteenth birthday. "Happy." X-7 frowned and shook his head. "I can't remember that."

It wasn't the only thing he and Div had in common.

There were their strength and agility, of course, and their single-minded determination. But it wasn't just that. They were both men without a past. They understood each other.

"Tell me again," X-7 said. "Tell me how it happened."

Div sighed. He'd told so many stories of the past, but this was the only one X-7 ever wanted to hear.

"They were betrayed," Div said. "It was supposed to be a simple raid. The munitions factory should have been an easy target. But one of the Rebels sold them out to the Empire...stormtroopers everywhere. They...they never had a chance."

"They killed our parents," X-7 said, brushing his fingers across a holopic of Astri. "Except they weren't really my parents."

"They were. In every way that counted," Div said fiercely.

"But Trever—"



"You," Div said, correcting him. "You managed to sneak into the factory."

"You were watching from the ridge, with electro-binocs," X-7 said. "You were too far away. Too young."

"You saw Astri and Clive go down," Div said. "You still had the charges, and you were determined to get them inside. You weren't about to let them die in vain. But then..." He shook his head. "I still don't understand it."

"Then the TIE fighters dropped the concussion missiles," X-7 finished for him. "They destroyed their own factory. With me inside."

"They killed our people for trying to destroy it—and then they blew it up," Div said. It was the one thing he'd never been able to understand. It made all the death even more pointless.

"Because you've never worked with the Empire," X-7 said. "It's obvious: They have something they couldn't risk falling into Rebel hands. Or maybe they were planning on razing it anyway, to build the garrison—so they destroyed it before you could. To make a point."

"A point that killed hundreds of their own men," Div said.

"Men are expendable," X-7 said with chilling calm. Then he gave himself a small shake. "I mean, that's what the Empire believes. That's what the Rebels don't understand."

Div understood. As soon as he'd seen that laserfire blast Astri to the ground, he'd understood.

"Except, they didn't kill everyone inside the factory," Div said. "There were survivors. You."

X-7 became very still. His face was a chalky gray. He looked up from the holopics and, for the first time in a week, met Div's eyes. "I may have made it out of that factory alive. But, Div, we both have to accept it: Your brother did not survive. Whoever I was, it's not...we can't..."

Hesitantly, half afraid he'd end up shot in the head, Div put a hand on X-7's shoulder. "You're here now," Div said. "So maybe we can."

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"You're late," Ferus said as Div arrived at the rendezvous point. Div and Trever had discovered the abandoned shack, a few kilometers from the house, many years earlier. They'd once used it as a clubhouse, where Trever pretended to be interested in Div's childish games, because that was what brothers did. Even adopted brothers. As they'd grown older, it had become a useful meeting point for the Belazuran resistance.

"It's not easy," Div said. "He's watching me all the time."

"I'm sorry you have to go through this," Ferus said. "If I could bear it for you—"

Div shook his head. "It's fine. It's actually..."

"What?"

"Nothing."

But Ferus looked at him with those placid, knowing eyes, and Div couldn't help continuing. "Whoever X-7 was, he was conscripted into Project Omega against his will. We know that. Brainwashed to forget whoever he used to be. He must have had a family, people who missed him—who may think he's dead. So isn't it possible..." Div was too ashamed to say it out loud. As he put the hope into words, even he could see how ludicrous it was.

"Possible that Trever is still alive somewhere?" Ferus said sadly. "Possible, even, that our lie has stumbled upon the truth? That X-7 really is—"

"I never said that," Div cut in harshly. "I'm no fool."

"A coincidence like that—"

"Aren't you Jedi always saying there *are* no coincidences?" Div asked.

"I would know if it was Trever," Ferus said heavily. "I would sense it."

"But I wouldn't, right?" Div scowled. "Because I've given up on the Force, I can't even be trusted to recognize my own brother. Not like *you* can. Even if you barely knew him. Only cared enough to leave him to die."

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Ferus flinched. Div cursed himself for doing it again: striking Ferus exactly where it was guaranteed to hurt the most.

"Just be careful," Ferus said without resentment. "Don't let your guard down. Don't think you can trust him."

"I don't trust anyone," Div said.

Just another thing he and X-7 had in common.

Before Ferus could reply, Luke, Leia, and Han burst into the shack. "We got them!" Luke said triumphantly, waving a memory chip in the air.

Han arched an eyebrow. "*We?*"

Luke rolled his eyes. "Okay. *Han* got the blueprints."

"And then *we* got Han out before the Imperials turned him into a scorch mark," Leia put in. "And by the way, you're welcome."

"And *you're* delusional," Han said. "If I hadn't been around to save both of your scrawny necks, you'd be dianoga food by now."

Ferus cleared his throat. At once, they fell silent. Div marveled at the way Ferus somehow commanded their respect despite that no one knew who he really was. Even Leia, who always acted like he was worthless, followed his lead. Not for the first time, Div wondered why Ferus had kept close to her all those years, pretending to be someone he wasn't. Ferus refused to speak of it.

This wasn't unusual. Ferus spoke little and often fell into long, heavy silences, staring into nothingness. He was just as kind and determined as ever, but some piece of him was gone.

"It sounds like X-7 is ready, too," Ferus said.

Luke shook his head, a fierce scowl crossing his face. "We have the blueprints; we don't need *him*."

"We can use him," Div countered.

"How are we supposed to use him when we can't trust him?" Luke asked.

"You have another plan?" Ferus said.

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Luke and Han glanced at each other, and Han gave a small nod. "We've been working on something," Luke said, pulling up the blueprints on his datapad. "If we go in through the south entrance..." He traced his index finger along the route.

There was a hint of movement in the shadows. A rustling, as soft as a whisper. Div looked up, on alert, but saw nothing.

As the others hunched over the datapad, Ferus caught his eye. He gave Div a nearly imperceptible nod.

So Ferus had heard it, too.

Div kept his head down, but his eyes flicked from side to side as he sought out their intruder. There was no further noise or movement, but Div could feel his presence.

How long had he been there?

And how much had he heard?

Div half listened as Luke and Han laid out their plan. His mind raced furiously, searching for a way to spin this to his advantage. And by the time the planning ended and the others slipped out, he was ready.

The last to go, Ferus hesitated on his way out. "Do you need me to—"

"Go," Div said firmly. Ferus didn't argue. He just tapped his hip, where Div could see the faint outline of a lightsaber hidden beneath his coat. Then he pointed at Div and left without another word. He didn't need words; his meaning was clear.

*May the Force be with you.*

Div waited in the dark. *May the Force be with me*, he thought wryly. *I'd rather you left me with your lightsaber.*

He had his blaster, of course. But he had a feeling that this time the blaster might not be enough.

Long minutes passed. Nothing happened. "You can come out now," he said loudly. "I'm not leaving until you do."

X-7 emerged from the shadows. He held his blaster in a trembling hand. "I should have known," he said.

"You did know," Div said, forcing himself to remain calm. If X-7 had overheard the conversation with Ferus, then all was lost.

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But there'd been no sign of his presence then. If all he'd overheard was the Rebels discussing their mission, then things could still be salvaged. Maybe. "That's why you followed me here. You wanted it to be true. You *wanted* me to be working with the Rebels."

"And you let me listen," X-7 said. "You wouldn't have done that unless..."

"That's right," Div said, encouraging him. "Unless I *wanted* you there. This isn't just any Rebel mission; this is the Imperial garrison built on the site of the first Imperial munitions factory. The one that—" He swallowed hard. He wouldn't need to fake the emotion. It flooded back whenever he thought about that day. "I've been waiting a long time for this opportunity, to show the Empire that they can't just destroy my family, my planet, without consequences. This is *payback*."

"Revenge," X-7 said in a dreamy voice.

Div realized that he had finally hit on a human emotion that X-7 understood. "Revenge," he agreed. "For what the Empire did to Clive and Astri—and to you. I've always known this moment would come. But I thought when it did, I would be alone."

X-7 lowered the blaster. He crossed the room in three long, swift strides and clasped Div's hand, then squeezed. "You won't," he said. Abruptly, he dropped his hand, and his tone turned businesslike. "Tell your Rebel friends I have all the Imperial access codes they need. I can obtain the necessary security clearances. Anything you need. We will have our revenge."

It was all working out better than Div could ever have hoped—assuming X-7 was telling the truth.

## Chapter Twelve

**R**evenge.

It was the thought that got him through the day, and the next. It was the dream. Revenge on the people who had slaughtered his family, who had stolen his identity. It was the only thing about this new life that made sense. By day, Div showed him holopic after holopic, strangers' faces that meant nothing to him, memories of another life, belonging to another man. And when the stars came out, so did the nightmares. More strangers, calling out for him. Green grass and sparkling seas and a feeling, alien and unwelcome. *Happy*. He woke every morning in a cold sweat, and only one thing calmed him down. One word.

Revenge.

This was the act that would unite his past and present. It would restore sanity to his insane world. He was Trever Flume, a passionate warrior; he was X-7, a heartless assassin. Two identities, galaxies apart, united by a single need.

Revenge.

Whatever he was, whatever he had been, he was a killer. He would kill, he would destroy, he would avenge. X-7 would repay his debt to Trever Flume, to the name, the body he wore like a costume. He would join the Rebels. He would help them tear

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down the walls of the Imperial garrison. His true nature would emerge in the hot crucible of revenge. Either he would strip away the years of X-7 and embrace Trevor Flume, or Trevor would die—really die this time—in the fire that incinerated the garrison, and X-7 would be free.

Finally, things had started making sense again. And then, the day before the attack, they stopped.

Alone in the strange house, he sat stiffly in a hard-backed chair. It was the only place he felt comfortable. This house, it was a place of comfort, of *decadence*. With its plush overstuffed couches, its fully stocked kitchen, its luxuriously soft mattresses and picture windows, it wasn't a house for a man like him, a man of discipline. A man of action.

He had come downstairs planning to look at more pictures, dull as they were with their endless grinning faces. Strangers—now nothing but corpses—who meant nothing to him.

But he couldn't face them.

*I have to leave this place*, he thought, standing abruptly. Suddenly certain. *Now, forever.*

But he didn't move. Because it was just as certain that he had to stay. There was Div. There was his empty past. There was *revenge*.

This place was tearing him apart.

He was standing there, frozen and undecided, when his comlink pinged with an incoming message. And everything fell apart.

*Don't believe the lies*, the message said. Transmitted on an encrypted channel. *If you want the truth, all you need do is ask*. There was no name, but there was a time. And an address.

X-7 knew it was likely a trap. But what kind of trap could contain him?

*Only a trap of lies*, he thought. He told himself that no one had the ability to lie to him; he was too good at seeing through pathetic human deception. Except that was no longer true, was it? Emotions clouded everything, dulling the sharp edges of the

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world. It was possible Div was lying to him and he was just too foolish to see it. If there was more truth to be found, he had to have it.

And if someone was trying to trap him, X-7 had to know who it was. You had to know your enemy before you could kill it.

The building was empty, but it didn't look abandoned.

There was no thick layer of dust, no broken transparisteel, no apparent garbage or squatters, nothing to indicate that the building had been deserted for more than a few days, if that. It was a stout, unassuming building tucked into a cluster of faceless high-rises. The Imperial presence in this city was unusually heavy. Stormtroopers were posted at regular intervals, noting the movements of the citizens. X-7 knew that the Rebels believed that destroying the garrison would be the first step in reclaiming Belazura. They hoped the city would rebel against its Imperial rulers and rediscover the courage that had let them battle the Empire for so long. But X-7 had his doubts. The faces he passed weren't the faces of Rebels. They were the faces of defeated, terrified cowards who'd learned their lessons about fighting back. Astri Divinian and Clive Flax hadn't been the only ones to die that day ten years earlier. The day the weapons factory was destroyed, the city had rebelled. Three thousand Belazurans had been killed.

Those who had survived weren't eager to be punished again.

Before going in, X-7 made a thorough survey of the perimeter. His modified infrared goggles let him peer through the walls and search for heat signatures, telltale signs of an enemy lying in wait. But he saw nothing. He drew his blaster and stepped inside.

It was only one room, large and echoing, lit by nothing but the dim glow of the setting suns, filtering through dirty transparisteel. Ten meters by ten meters, ample windows and doors to serve as escape routes. Which, of course, meant ample



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points for possible attack. He prowled the edge of the wide room, turning in slow circles with his weapon raised. No surprises this time, no one sneaking up on him from behind. It would be easier if he knew what he was searching for. A person? A message?

A bomb?

There was a soft, nearly inaudible click. X-7 went on high alert, spinning wildly, searching in vain for the source of the noise. The building was still empty. Then the silence was broken by a whirring hum, machinery springing into motion. Certain of only one thing—the need to *leave*—X-7 pivoted and raced toward the nearest exit.

A durasteel shutter slammed down across the door, blocking his way.

The room echoed with the clang of durasteel on duracrete as the thick, heavy shutters slammed down all around him, covering every window, every door, every means of escape. All except for one: The entrance to a turbolift had suddenly appeared in a previously blank wall of duracrete.

X-7 combed the room, centimeter by centimeter, making sure there wasn't any other option. There wasn't. So he stepped into the turbolift.

As soon as the doors slid shut, the bottom dropped out beneath him. The lift zoomed downward, then abruptly stopped and whooshed horizontally for several long seconds. X-7 calculated that he was at least twenty meters below the ground, traveling two, possibly three city blocks. He'd come across such contraptions on other planets, underground turbolifts, buildings connected by secret passageways. The Rebels were like borrrats, hollowing out warrens in the heart of every city so they could operate beneath the Imperial radar. But X-7 was certain no Rebel cells were operating on Belazura—none, that is, except for the one he'd found himself a part of.

Without warning, the turbolift started to rise.

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As it came to a stop, X-7 gauged the speed and the time and, with a simple calculation, judged himself to be about twenty stories off the ground. Too high to jump, if it came to that. But not too high to climb.

The doors soundlessly slid open, revealing an office nearly identical to one he'd recently visited on Coruscant. Its occupant stood behind the imposing desk, clearly waiting for X-7's arrival.

X-7's first reaction was relief. His body wanted to drop to its knees, beg forgiveness from his commander.

"Surprised?" Rezi Soresh raised his eyebrows. "But not disappointed, I hope?"

X-7 raised his blaster and pulled the trigger.

## Chapter Thirteen

The shot tore into the wall behind Soresh's head.

Soresh sighed. "This is Sittana marble and it certainly looks better without holes in it," he said. "But I suppose I should thank you for not putting one in my head."

"What are you doing here?" X-7 asked harshly.

"Oh, your Rebel reconnaissance didn't reveal that I was in the neighborhood?" Soresh asked with false shock. X-7 kept his face blank. So Soresh knew about the Rebel plans—which meant they were doomed. "I'm supervising the new munitions shipments—and more to the point, I'm supervising *you*. You think I can afford to have an agent running wild through the galaxy? In *this* condition? That should be obvious. No, the question you should be asking is why are *you* here?" He formed a temple with his fingers and propped his chin on his fingertips. "I didn't train you to be the kind of man who could be surprised."

He pressed something on his desk, and the door to the turbolift disappeared into the wall. A bookshelf took its place. X-7 cursed himself for letting his one guaranteed means of exit disappear.

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“Old Rebel hideaway,” Soresh said, gesturing at the hidden turbolift, obviously pleased with himself. “Of course, there aren’t any of them left to hide. We took care of that.”

X-7 did his best to ignore Soresh. Automatically, he surveyed his surroundings, eyes alighting on any possible means of escape. The office, clearly a temporary one, was mostly bare, although the Commander had stupidly left his files and datapad sitting out on the desk. Perhaps he’d forgotten that he’d equipped X-7 with a photographic memory. Once the information passed in front of his face, it was in his mind forever. The desk also contained the controls for the hidden turbolift. Once the Commander was out of commission—which would be easy enough to see to—the lift would be accessible.

And if all else failed, there was always the window.

Soresh waved a hand lazily at the transparisteel. “Go,” he said. “If that’s what you really want. I didn’t think you were the kind of man who would enjoy living a lie, but be my guest.”

“There are only two things I want,” X-7 retorted. “My life—and your death.” He watched his commander carefully, searching for some sign of anxiety or concern. But the man remained perfectly calm. Confident. *What does he know that I don’t?* X-7 thought, suddenly wary. Maybe he should leave sooner rather than later.

But if he left, the Commander would always be waiting to reassert control, to turn X-7 back into a slave. It would be much more expedient to kill him now.

*Think like a human*, X-7 reminded himself. *Let yourself feel.*

Fine, then. Not just *expedient*. It would be satisfying—it would be *just*—to watch the Commander die.

Soresh burst into laughter. “*Want?* You don’t know the meaning of the word.”

“You know nothing about me,” X-7 said. “Not anymore.”

“I know *everything* about you.” Soresh’s voice was like a dragonsnake, slithering into X-7’s ears, into his brain. Laced with venom. “Certainly more than you know about yourself.”

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"And I know about *you*," X-7 spat out. "Your precious program, your *volunteers*. We were *prisoners*. You told me I'd enlisted, that all I wanted was to serve the Empire. I was a *Rebel*. You killed me, the real me—you made me a murderer and turned me against my own."

"Whining doesn't become you," the Commander said. But his voice had tightened, nearly imperceptibly. His eyelids fluttered. X-7 knew the signs. He'd hit a nerve. "Nor does stupidity. You actually believe their lies?"

"I can see when a man is telling the truth," X-7 said coolly. "You taught me well."

"Fine." The Commander stood. "You weren't a volunteer. None of you were. But you're not this, this pathetic *Trever Flume* they're trying to turn you into, either. It's a trap. Don't be such a fool that you walk right into it."

X-7 scanned the Commander's face for evidence that this, too, was a lie. But he could find none.

*It doesn't mean anything*, he thought. The Commander was a practiced manipulator.

And X-7 wasn't exactly objective when it came to listening to his lies.

"I don't believe you," he said steadily. He wouldn't let Soresh sense *his* inner hesitation. Perhaps he was becoming more human, more *Trever*, but enough of him was still X-7. His thoughts, his doubts remained his own.

"Believe me; don't believe me. That's irrelevant. Haven't you figured it out yet?" The Commander twisted his face into a gruesome smile. "It doesn't *matter* who you were. *Trever Flume*, or some other fool, whoever it was, that man is dead. There's no going backward, no hiding in the past. No becoming *ordinary* again. Why would you ever want such a thing? You're better than that. Stronger, faster, smarter. Harder. Better because *I* made you that way. You think you can make yourself soft again? Make yourself stupid? Please. You're a weapon, razor sharp. Be grateful."

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“To *you*?” X-7 whispered harshly, and drew out a slim vibroblade. The blaster would be quicker, surer. But he wanted satisfaction.

“You can thank me later,” Soresh said breezily. “Or kill me now, if that’s what you really *want*. If you hate your creator so very much. Kill me.”

It was all the invitation X-7 needed. He raised the blade. Stepped forward.

*Tried* to step forward. But it was like his shoes were nailed to the floor.

“Problem?” The Commander smiled. “Let me help you out.” He took a step toward X-7. Then another, and another, until they were standing face to face.

*Now*, X-7 thought. But his limbs were frozen. And his mind was screaming in pain.

He hadn’t had any trouble holding the blade to the Commander’s throat before. But that had been different. Then he had only intended to scare Soresh. Now, with murder running through his veins, he couldn’t move. Could barely breathe.

“Feeling out of sorts?” Soresh said smugly. “Limbs a little heavy? Chest a little constricted?”

X-7 tried to speak, but found he couldn’t even do that. The more desperately he wanted to kill the Commander, the more rigid and useless his limbs became. It was becoming an effort to stand. The vibroblade was heavy and awkward in his numb fingers. Distantly, he felt it drop to the floor.

And the pain...

X-7 had suffered pain before. He had been bred for pain. But this was different. It had no source; it came from within.

“You can’t hurt me,” the Commander said, “because I’m your master, whether you choose to forget that or not. Your *mind* will never forget. Your *programming* will never forget.” He clapped a hand on X-7’s shoulder. X-7 spat in his face. The Commander didn’t even bother to wipe it off. “Let this be a lesson to you,” he said, saliva dripping down his cheek. “*Humans* have free will. But

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you have only *my* will. You're not a person anymore. You're a tool. You're a program. You are, and will always be, *mine*."

X-7 finally understood.

*Take me home.* The words formed themselves in his brain, almost without his intention. But he knew that if he were to try to form them, his mouth would comply. He would be able to move. His rebellious body would fall into line again, ready to serve the Commander. It would be easy. He opened his mouth.

And the window exploded.

## Chapter Fourteen

Luke burst through the window, Div and Han close behind him. X-7 was standing face to face with an Imperial officer, both of them as still as stone. “Come on!” Luke shouted. X-7 didn’t move; he didn’t even turn in the direction of the commotion. The Imperial blanched at the sight of the Rebels and their blasters. He backed away, stumbling over his own feet, and ducked beneath his desk. One hand groped blindly on the desk, feeling around for the comlink. “Security!” he shouted in a high, fluttery voice. “Emergency! Security!”

“X-7, come on,” Luke said urgently.

“Enough,” Han said. He grabbed X-7 and slipped a hook at the end of the liquid-cable line around X-7’s belt buckle. “Let’s get out of here while we still can.” He gave the liquid cable a harsh yank. X-7 started, as if suddenly realizing they were there.

“What...?”

But there was no time. The Rebels dragged X-7 toward the window. As one, they jumped.

It was heart-stopping, flying into midair like that, the ground so many stories beneath. But the cable caught. “All clear?” Div said into the comlink.

“All clear,” Leia’s voice reported.



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Luke nodded. "Coming up." He pressed the retraction switch, and the line went taut, then yanked him up the side of the building. Div, Han, and X-7 dangled a few meters beneath him.

It would be easy for Luke to reach across with his lightsaber and sever X-7's line. It wouldn't even be that difficult to make it look like an accident. X-7 would plummet to the ground, and Luke would never have to look into his cold eyes again. He would never have to pretend they were allies.

And he wouldn't have to force himself to *trust* X-7—to once again put his life in the traitor's hands.

But the edge of the roof was drawing nearer and nearer. Ferus's arm dangled over the side. He gripped Luke's arm and hauled him onto the roof. The moment was gone.

*We should have just left him,* Luke thought.

But this rescue mission wasn't about helping X-7. It was about protecting a valuable resource, their newest weapon against the Empire. Nothing could be more important than that.

"We should call it off," Luke argued. "Bad enough that the Empire knows Rebels are on Belazura—"

"Because *you* screwed up the blueprint retrieval," Div pointed out angrily.

Luke ignored him. They might be in Div's house, but it was Leia's mission. She was the one he had to convince. "If X-7 compromised us with the Imperials—"

"We are *not* calling it off," Div snapped. "After everything we've done? General Rieekan gave me his word."

"Nobody wants this," Leia said. "But we have to proceed carefully."

"I say we proceed right off this rock," Han said. "Now, before the Empire comes calling."

Leia scowled. "Of course *you* want to run."

"It's not about running," Han argued. "It's about being *smart*."

"And what would you know about that?" Leia asked.

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Han leaned forward, jabbing a finger at the princess. “Listen to me, Your Worshipfulness. *You* face down a mean Klatooinian, a crazy Ortolan, and a Chiss with an anger-management problem and a CryoBan grenade—all on the same night. And *then* you talk to me about running away. I’d like to see *you* try to tie a Klatooinian to the back of a wild rancor.”

“And I’d like to see *you* swallowed up by a—”

“I may have a solution.”

Everyone looked up. X-7 had appeared in the room with his usual silent stealth. He’d spoken only once since they’d fled Soresh’s roof in a stolen airspeeder. And that wasn’t to say thank you. It was only to ask how they’d known where he was—and why they were following him. “I lost you once,” Div had said, thinking quickly. “I wasn’t about to lose you again.” Accepting that, X-7 had fallen into a stony silence. Until now.

“Since it’s my fault that you’re in this position,” X-7 continued, “your having felt the need to...*rescue* me.”

There was something off about the way he said the word, Luke thought. *Rescue*. As if it was an insult. But his face was placid, his voice pleasant; nothing to indicate that he was anything less than sincere. Nothing but Luke’s vague misgivings.

“While I was a guest of Commander Soresh, I had a chance to learn a few things,” X-7 said, keeping his eyes on Div. “One of particular interest to you, I believe. Tomorrow, at sixteen hundred hours, an Imperial delegation will be arriving on Belazura for a tour of the Imperial garrison. A delegation that includes Darth Vader.”

It was as if all the air had been sucked out of the room.

“Vader?” Luke repeated. “*Here?*”

X-7 nodded.

Leia’s face had gone pale. Luke knew she held Darth Vader responsible for the destruction of Alderaan. Responsible for the deaths of everyone she loved.

And it was Vader’s lightsaber that had struck Ben to the ground.

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Vader was the evil engine at the heart of the Empire, doing the Emperor's dark bidding. He was an enforcer, a last resort, the ultimate threat. And without him, the Empire might well begin to crumble.

This could be it. The beginning of the end. *If* they could pull off the attack. If X-7's intel could be trusted.

"We go forward," Leia said in a commanding tone. "Tomorrow, Belazura's Imperial garrison goes up in smoke."

Luke nodded, trying to suppress his doubts. "And Vader with it."

## Chapter Fifteen

**I**t was time.

The Rebels gathered in the small Divinian compound. They inventoried their weapons, made one last survey of the garrison blueprints, rehearsed the plan one final time. And then they set out to destroy the Empire's seat of power on Belazura.

Or die trying.

X-7 suppressed a smile. He knew which it would be. He was just sorry he wouldn't be around to watch. "Div, wait," he said, pulling his so-called brother away from the others. "I need to talk to you for a minute. In private."

Div looked indecisively back and forth between X-7 and the departing Rebels. "Can it wait?"

"It really can't," X-7 said. "Brother."

Div checked the time on his datapad and nodded. "Five minutes," he agreed. "Then we need to get into position."

X-7 didn't say anything.

"Well?" Div asked. "What is it?"

"Not here." X-7 led him upstairs, into the room that had once belonged to Trever. He shut the door.

He had considered letting Div go, showing some form of mercy to the man who might be his adopted brother. But that

## STAR WARS: Trapped

impulse was just a symptom of the sickness, the rot that had eaten away at his insides, turning his durasteel will to Sarkanian jelly. And Div was at the root of it all. These memories, these delusions, these repulsive *feelings*, they all revolved around Div and his stories of the past. He was the only link to Trever, the only thing tethering X-7 to humanity. With Div gone, Trever would die forever.

X-7 would be free.

“What’s going on?” Div asked. X-7 could tell he was starting to get suspicious.

He should just *do* it. But he wasn’t ready. Not yet.

“I couldn’t let you go with them,” he said. He turned his back to Div, picked up one of the old photo albums, and leafed through. Shot after shot of Trever and Lune, happy boys, happy together. But he wasn’t looking at the images. The photo album shielded him as he drew the palm-sized laser blaster from his coat, readied himself to fire. At point-blank range, there would be no risk of error.

“What? Why not?”

“They’re all going to die,” X-7 said coldly. “The Empire is waiting for them to arrive. As you should have been waiting for me.” He whirled around, raised the blaster.

But he didn’t pull the trigger.

Div froze. His eyes widened. “You sent them into an ambush?” he said.

“You’re worried about your friends?” X-7 asked. “*Now?*”

It was the final straw. If *this* was what it meant to be human, X-7 wanted nothing to do with it. Ignoring the threat to one’s own life because someone else was in danger? It was the quickest way to die. Other people were like anchors, dragging you down. If you let yourself become attached, you’d inevitably be pulled under.

This, X-7 finally understood, was what made him superior. He’d deceived himself long enough, pretending he could be one

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of them. He'd torn himself apart, pretending to be someone he wasn't. Pretending to be *someone*.

It was a lie. He was no one.

He was X-7.

There was no escaping that.

"What is this?" Div said quickly. "We've been over and over this. It's not a trap. Everything I've told you has been the absolute truth. You're my—"

"Brother," X-7 said. "Don't worry. I believe you."

Div released a nearly imperceptible sigh.

"That's why I need to do this," X-7 said.

He fired.

## Chapter Sixteen

“Something’s wrong,” Luke whispered, nervously adjusting his maintenance uniform as they approached the garrison’s workers’ entrance.

“Of course something’s wrong,” Han shot back, sounding annoyed. “We’re walking into an Imperial garrison. Two of us against two hundred of them. And we’re doing it voluntarily. What’s *not* wrong about that?” He hoisted his toolbox, which held six Merr-Sonn Munitions Class-A thermal detonators. The plan was simple. They would use the security access codes X-7 had given them. Div and X-7 were doing the same on the opposite end of the garrison. They would sneak in, place the detonators at the heart of the building, a weapons arsenal, where any explosion would ignite a wider blaze. The detonators were on a timer set for thirty minutes. Just as Darth Vader was surveying his latest triumph, the building would explode.

Two Rebel strike forces under Leia’s command were positioned around the perimeter of the building, ready to go at a moment’s notice.

Han reached the designated entrance. He raised his hand to enter the code that would let them slip in unnoticed. Without thinking, Luke grabbed his wrist to stop him.

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"What now, kid?" Han asked irritably. "If you don't have the stomach for this—"

"It's not that," Luke whispered. "Something's wrong."

He had that feeling, the dark, suffocating cloud that sometimes descended over him when danger was near. The Force, warning him of trouble. But it wasn't just that. It was something he *didn't* feel—something missing.

The last time he'd been near Darth Vader, he'd sensed a different darkness. He hadn't understood it then, but he remembered it vividly. It was *power*, sizzling in the air, like the change in air pressure before a storm, subtle at first, then overwhelming.

And it was missing.

"Vader isn't here," Luke said.

"How would you know?" Han asked.

"I just know." And if X-7 had been lying about Vader's presence, what else had he been lying about?

Han shook his head. Luke knew he had little patience for what he thought of as Jedi mumbo jumbo, which meant Luke wasn't going to convince him with talk of gut feelings and trusting the Force. He had to speak in a language Han understood.

"You don't trust X-7 any more than I do," Luke pointed out.

Han didn't disagree.

Luke pushed on. "So if he gave us the wrong codes—"

"Kid, if X-7's against us, we've got bigger problems than the wrong codes," Han said. "And—" He jerked his head toward the AC-1 surveillance droids keeping their mechanical eyes on the entrance. "It's probably already too late." He gave the barrel of his blaster a loving tap. "But it's not like we're going in unprepared."

"Two of us and two hundred of them," Luke reminded him. "You're prepared for *that*?"



## STAR WARS: Trapped

Han laughed. He entered the security code. The door slid open. No stormtroopers, no alarms, no nothing. “Looks like you were worried about nothing,” Han said as they stepped inside.

Then his comlink pinged. “Luke! Han!” Leia’s tinny voice blared through the static. “It’s a trap—” Her voice was cut off by the thunder of an explosion.

The transmission went dead.

Ferus didn’t know why he’d been compelled to turn back. To anyone else—to Leia, especially—it would look cowardly. He’d abandoned his designated post for no particular reason. He’d fled the base just before the Rebel raid was to begin, and was headed as fast as he could to the relative safety of the Divinian compound. It was irrational and unexpected. But it wasn’t cowardice.

It was a certainty that something was very wrong.

And the ghost of a voice, whispering in his ears.

*Go.*

It could have been Obi-Wan’s voice, speaking from beyond the grave. But Ferus believed it was his own. And he followed it.

The Divinian house was empty. Ferus prowled the rooms one by one, lightsaber at the ready. There was something off here. He could sense it. He flung open door after door. Kitchen. Refresher. Bedroom. A second bedroom—

Ferus gasped and rushed across the room. “Div!” he shouted, kneeling by the body.

The boy’s eyes were closed. A blast of laserfire had scorched his shoulder. Ferus pressed two fingers to Div’s pale neck. He closed his eyes. “Please,” he whispered, feeling for a pulse.

It was there. Faint, but there. He was alive.

“Come on,” Ferus urged him, hurriedly dressing the wound. “Stay with me. Stay with me, Lune.”

“How many times do I have to tell you that’s not my name?” Div opened his eyes and gave Ferus a weak smile.

“What happened?”

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Div struggled to sit up.

“Easy,” Ferus said. “Go slow.”

Div shook his head. “No time. Head for the garrison. It’s an ambush.”

“X-7?”

“I don’t know what happened. He just...turned.”

“He shot you in the shoulder,” Ferus mused, tucking Div’s left arm into a makeshift sling.

“I noticed.”

“Interesting.”

Div dragged himself to his feet, wincing at the pain. “You find this *interesting*?”

“He is a trained Imperial assassin, and he shot you point-blank—in the shoulder,” Ferus said, helping Div stand. “If he’d wanted you dead, you’d be dead. Makes you wonder.”

“Makes *you* wonder, maybe,” Div said. “Makes me want to go save our friends from walking into a bloodbath.”

Div was pale and trembling with the effort of standing. The sling kept his shoulder immobile, but moving was clearly agony. “I’m not sure how much help you can be to anyone in this condition,” Ferus said, worried.

Div just stared at him with the same determined, unsettling gaze he’d had as a child. “I have to try.”

## Chapter Seventeen

**“Go!”** Luke urged Han. “I’ll plant the detonators. You help Leia.”

Han was already in motion. The Rebel strike forces had camouflaged themselves in the wooded hills surrounding the garrison. Now their hiding place was lit up by exploding grenades and bolts of laserfire crackling through the trees. It had been an ambush, and the Rebel forces were surely overpowered. There was no chance that Han’s presence would turn the tide, even with the fragmentation grenades tucked into his belt beside his backup blaster. If he was smart, he’d just walk away, save his own skin while he had the chance. But he didn’t hesitate to plunge into the smoky battle.

Chewbacca was in there somewhere.

Leia was in there.

It was total chaos. Laserfire shot through the thick haze of smoke. The nahtival trees were on fire. The branches crackled as they burned, and flaming leaves fluttered through the air, igniting small patches of zura-grass. The Rebels and the stormtroopers seemed to be firing blindly, desperate to hit someone—anyone.

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There were at least twice as many stormtroopers as there were Rebels. Han bashed the nearest one in the back of the head and pushed forward into the center of the mess.

Laserfire peppered the trees. “Chewie!” Han shouted, catching sight of the Wookiee surrounded by four stormtroopers. Chewbacca grabbed one in each hand and swung them like a stun baton into the others. The Imperials went down in a grunting heap.

“Get down, buddy!” Han shouted as a stormtrooper perched in a tree began shooting at the Wookiee. Han whipped his blaster into action and took him out with a single shot to the head. The Imperial toppled to the ground, landing with a clatter on two of his allies.

Chewbacca roared in gratitude, already turning toward a couple of Rebels pinned down by a circle of troopers. Han was charging in to help when a blast of laserfire shot past, singeing his shoulder. He flinched, whipping around to return fire. But his assailant was already down. Leia stood over the body. She snatched the trooper’s fallen blaster rifle and tossed it to Han.

“Behind you!” she cried.

Han snatched the rifle out of the air as he spun around, now firing with both hands at the approaching stormtroopers. Three toppled over. But another burst of laserfire pelted his leg. He staggered, trying to ignore the pain.

“Took you long enough,” Leia said with false cheer. She and Han positioned themselves back to back, spraying laserfire at any Imperials who came too close. Bodies in white armor littered the ground, but they lay side by side with fallen Rebels. Too many of them. “Where’s Luke?”

“He went in,” Han said.

“You let him go alone?” Leia shouted. She blasted a stormtrooper, but from the tone of her voice, Han suspected she had another target in mind.

“Excuse me if I thought you could use a little *help* here,” Han growled as the air split with the roaring engine of an approaching

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Imperial airspeeder. Han lobbed one of his fragmentation grenades, and the speeder exploded in midair, showering the battle with fiery shards of durasteel.

"We should go help him," Leia said.

"After you," Han drawled, gesturing toward the circle of stormtroopers surrounding them. It seemed that the more they felled, the more reinforcements appeared. It was impossible: no escape, no retreat, and no helping Luke. "Don't worry, the kid can handle himself."

"I hope you're right," Leia said.

*I'd better be*, Han thought. An explosion in the heart of the garrison might just send the stormtroopers into a panicked retreat.

Otherwise...well, he had two blasters, six rounds of ammunition, an angry Wookiee, and an even angrier princess on his side. He just hoped it would be enough.

Luke strode down a corridor filled with Imperial officers, keeping his eyes straight ahead and trying to pretend he belonged. They barely glanced at him, their eyes noting his maintenance uniform, then skimming over him as if he was an inanimate object. He couldn't understand why his presence hadn't raised an alarm. Was it possible that X-7 hadn't betrayed them? That something else had revealed the Rebel presence to the Empire?

Possible, maybe, but Luke didn't buy it. Something else was going on here.

But while he tried to figure out what, he made his way as casually as possible to the primary arsenal hold, where the majority of the weapons were stored. He still had the thermal detonators; he still had a mission. His friends were counting on him to complete it. Belazura was counting on him.

He had memorized the blueprints. The garrison was a mazelike fortress, its twisting passageways turning in on themselves and dead-ending without warning. It had been

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designed to confuse its occupants, even the ones with top secret clearance—because there was always something even *more* top secret. The Empire thrived on secrecy, even the highest officers operating in ignorance of the Emperor’s true plans. The garrison had been designed with that philosophy in mind. As Luke wound his way deeper and deeper into the heart of the building, he began to wonder if he’d ever make it out.

X-7’s security codes ushered him through checkpoint after checkpoint. Luke remained certain he was walking into a trap, but there was nothing to do but keep going. He reached the access point to the weapons arsenal. Two stormtroopers manned the door. “Authorized personnel only,” one of them informed him.

“I am authorized,” Luke said, offering the security card that had helped him through the other checkpoints. He noted the security pad over the door. It wasn’t a keypad, like the others he’d seen. This one required a handprint.

The guards didn’t move to let him pass. “You don’t have clearance.”

Pulling out a blaster would only alarm them. But the hilt of his deactivated lightsaber looked like an innocent piece of durasteel. Harmless. He gripped it, ready.

“No one enters without level-four clearance,” the stormtrooper said. “No maintenance.”

“But I have—”

“This is TBR-312,” the stormtrooper said into his comlink. “Unauthorized personnel—”

Luke flung his arm out, activating the lightsaber as it swung toward the stormtrooper. The comlink dropped from his hand. His counterpart swiveled a blaster toward Luke. But Luke was already diving for the floor. He somersaulted toward the first stormtrooper, slashing with a smoother, upward jab, just as Div had taught him. It sliced through the white plastoid armor, and the stormtrooper dropped.

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Luke leapt immediately back to his feet and jumped away from the other trooper's blasts. He struggled to get close enough to land a blow, but the laserfire kept him on the defensive.

*Remember what Div taught you,* he thought.

Luke spun and leapt into the air, slashing the beam with a diagonal thrust. The stormtrooper stumbled backward, firing blindly. Luke intercepted the beam, angling the blade to deflect the bolt back at the stormtrooper. It slammed into his chest, knocking him to the ground. He clutched once at his scorched armor and then was still.

Luke removed the stormtrooper's glove and pressed the trooper's hand to the palm-recognition security interface. The door slid open, revealing a massive chamber at least fifty meters wide and three stories high. Laser cannons, heavy turbolasers, and concussion missiles were stockpiled everywhere. As the Rebels had guessed, this was the perfect spot. Luke dragged the stormtroopers' bodies into the room and shut the door again. Then he fumbled with the toolbox, pulling out the detonators.

The Imperial comlink crackled to life. "Report, TBR-312. What is the situation?"

"No situation," Luke said quickly into the comlink. "Everything is under control."

It wouldn't hold them off for long. He began planting the detonators, carefully choosing the largest of the weapons stockpiles. He worked quickly, setting the timer for fifteen minutes rather than the planned thirty. It would give him less time to escape—but better to be caught in the blast than give the Imperials enough time to discover and defuse the charges.

Maybe it was inevitable that the Imperials would catch him. But by the time they did, it would be too late.

X-7 stalked his prey like a manka cat. Stealthy and silent as a shadow, he trailed Luke Skywalker, waiting for his moment.

Div was dead. Up in the hills, the Rebel forces were, even now, being slaughtered like a herd of banthas. And now just a

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single loose end remained—one mission that belonged to him alone. Skywalker was the first target who had avoided his attack. That had been the beginning of all this. The failure to kill Skywalker had put X-7 on a collision path with his disgusting human emotions, his disgusting human past. And since Skywalker had been the beginning, he would also be the end.

X-7 hadn't tipped the Empire off to the Rebels' entire plan. He'd given them the coordinates of the hidden Rebels. But he'd led them away from Skywalker. This kill was his.

As slow and clumsy as he was, the Rebel had managed to make his way into the arsenal. The giant chamber stored hundreds of weapons: mines, ion cannons, turbo-lasers—everything the Empire could ever need to subdue a planet. If any of the Rebels had had brains in their heads, they would have realized that *stealing* the weapons would be far more efficient than *destroying* them. But of course, the Rebels never thought; they just acted. It was why they were doomed to lose. Luke was determined to destroy the garrison and the weapons it housed—and he'd chosen exactly the right spot. Even a small explosion would touch off an inferno. It would be enough firepower to take down the entire building. Perfect for Skywalker's purposes.

It would also be enough noise—massive load-lifter droids restocking the weaponry—to cover X-7's footsteps as he crept along the catwalk far overhead.

Perfect for X-7's purposes.

X-7 readied his laser rifle. Took aim. *No one to save you this time*, he thought, watching Luke's tiny figure through the scope. *This time, you die.*



## Chapter Eighteen

X-7's finger twitched toward the trigger.

Div launched himself at X-7, knocking him off balance. They tumbled to the ground. X-7's blast rifle flew out of his hand. He slammed a fist into Div's shoulder, jabbing it squarely into Div's wound. Div clenched his teeth, trying to ignore the pain, but his shoulder spasmed. X-7 hit the wound again, harder, and shoved him aside. Div struggled to fight back, but his strength was failing.

And then a glowing blade slashed down. X-7 threw himself out of the way just in time. Ferus struck again.

"I know what you are," X-7 gasped, springing to his feet and moving out of the way of the beam. "I've always known. You don't scare me, Jedi."

Ferus advanced, lightsaber raised. "I should."

Furious at his weakness, Div could do nothing but watch the fierce battle play out. Far below them, Luke had already finished setting the thermal detonators. *Escape while you still can*, Div urged him silently. But even if Div had shouted it, Luke never would have heard him over the thunder of the machinery.

Ferus slashed at X-7 with the blue blade. X-7 jumped, sidestepped out of the way, and suddenly, the assassin produced

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a lightwhip, crackling with deadly laser energy. He flicked it at Ferus, who leapt over the snakelike rope and somersaulted along the catwalk.

“Not bad, old man,” X-7 said. “But not good enough.” Swinging the whip in a deadly arc with one hand, he wielded a blaster with the other. The weapon sent a wide spray of laserfire at Ferus, who was trapped against the railing with no cover. He slipped between the bursts of laserfire with nearly impossible speed and agility, then nimbly hopped onto the railing and balanced on the five-centimeter-wide durasteel.

X-7 released an icy chuckle and struck out with the whip, trying to knock Ferus off his perch. But Ferus used the height to his advantage, his lightsaber bearing down on X-7’s arm. X-7 stifled a cry of pain and dropped the blaster. A bloody stain spread across his shirt. He went into a frenzy, hacking and slashing with his good arm. The whip whistled through the air. It caught Ferus on the leg, only a light blow, but enough to knock him off balance. He toppled backward—and disappeared from sight.

Div gasped.

X-7 laughed again. It was a hard, inhuman noise, like grinding gears. He leaned over the railing. Div didn’t want to imagine what X-7 saw below. Ferus’s broken body, smashed on the duracrete.

“Where are you, old man?” X-7 sounded surprised.

He turned around—just in time to see Ferus spring over the opposite edge of the catwalk, his lightsaber pointed straight at X-7’s heart.

His aim was true.

X-7 dropped to the ground, his eyes glassy, his body limp. Blood pooled beneath him. He gasped, as if he couldn’t draw enough air. But then his rasping grew louder. He was trying to speak. It was just two syllables, soft but clear.

“Div. Please.”

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Div looked at Ferus, who offered no guidance. So against his better judgment, Div approached the fallen assassin. He knelt by X-7's side. "What is it?"

He hated the man for what he'd done—to the Rebels, to Luke, to himself. But more, he hated what the man represented. To the end, he'd been a tool of the Empire. A ruthless killer who served other ruthless killers. A symbol of the darkness that shadowed Div's life.

It shouldn't have mattered that for a few days, he'd been something else.

"Brother," X-7 gasped.

Div shook his head.

"My brother. Tell me. You are." With a mighty effort, X-7 slid his body up along the wall, until he was in a half-sitting position. Before he could speak again, his body was racked by a spasm of coughing. He leaned over, spit out a mouthful of phlegm and blood. "I need to know," he said in a clearer voice. His chest heaved. "Before I die. Need to know who I was. If I was someone. That I..." X-7 trailed off, his eyes fluttering shut. For a moment, Div thought that was it. The end. But then the eyes opened again, wide and rimmed with red. "I mattered to someone. Need to know."

*Trever mattered, Div thought fiercely. He's been dead for ten years, while you lived. You lived and you killed.*

The man deserved to die alone, broken, without comfort. How dare he ask Div for anything? How dare he expect sympathy, *pity* after all he'd done?

And yet...

"You mattered to someone," Div said. "You were someone, once." Because that was true. Someone had been born, had a mother, a father, maybe a brother. Someone had been taken by the Empire, had his memories scrubbed away. Turned into a killer. Maybe it wasn't Trever—but it could have been.

And Div wouldn't have wanted Trever to die alone, no matter what he'd done.

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He rested a hand on X-7's shoulder. "You mattered. Brother."

The ghost of a smile crossed X-7's face. He closed his eyes. Div's hand stayed where it was, rising and falling with X-7's shallow breaths, until the breaths stopped.

"He's gone," Ferus said softly behind him.

Div had almost forgotten he was there. "Good riddance," Div said harshly. He stood up. "Let's get out of here before this place blows." Luke was gone. They had thirty minutes—if Luke had set the timer as planned. But nothing else had gone as planned. So they fled the building, Ferus's flashing lightsaber cutting down the few Imperials foolish enough to step into their path. Div's wound throbbed with every step, but he ignored the pain.

They ran side by side, their footfalls in sync. But when they finally stopped, a safe distance away from the garrison, Div turned his back before Ferus could speak.

"Div." Ferus reached for him. Div jerked away. "You're angry," Ferus said. "What is it?"

*I'm always angry*, Div thought. From their perch on a nearby hill, he watched the garrison, waiting for it to burst into flame. Picturing the look on X-7's face just before the life drained from his eyes.

The building exploded. The ground shook. Flames licked the sky.

*It's all happening again*, Div thought. Watching an explosion from the hills while his brother's body burned. *Not my brother*, he thought. *But someone's*.

"Aren't you angry?" he finally asked without looking at Ferus. "He sent your friends into an ambush. If we hadn't stopped him just now, he would have murdered Luke."

"You're not angry at him," Ferus said with that maddening Jedi certainty. "You're angry at yourself. For being misled?" He narrowed his eyes, then shook his head. "No, I don't think that's it."

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“Do you need me here for this conversation?” Div asked irritably. “Seems like you already have all the answers.”

Ferus just waited. Div could be a patient man, but he had the feeling that Ferus could wait forever. And while it would be easy enough to turn his back and leave...he didn't.

“Yes, I'm angry!” he spat out. “That I let him die thinking he was Trever. That I let myself...”

“That you let yourself think he was Trever,” Ferus prompted. “Even for just a moment. You let yourself hope. Nothing wrong with that.”

“It was a stupid, childish fantasy,” Div growled. “Coincidences like that only happen in storybooks. In real life, you lose people, they stay lost. The galaxy doesn't bring them back to you. Your precious Force doesn't make the galaxy any less empty.”

“It's less empty now,” Ferus said. “Now that the Force has brought you back to me. And me back to you.”

Div snorted. “And what good is that? We're both broken, Ferus. Or haven't you noticed?”

“The Force doesn't always give us what we want, or even what we need,” Ferus said. “But it always gives us something we can use. To survive.”

“And that's exactly what we do,” Div said bitterly. “Survive. Good for us.”

“Yes, Lune.”

Div didn't correct the name. And when Ferus put a hand on his shoulder, Div didn't shrug him off. Ferus smiled sadly. “Good for us.”

The garrison was burning, a towering inferno that set the horizon ablaze. The stormtroopers in the surrounding hills had abandoned their fight with the Rebels and were doing their best to combat the flames. But it was no use. Slowly but surely, the garrison was crumbling to the ground. It was just one building—

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but it was enough to spark a fire in the heart of every Belazuran who chafed at Imperial control.

As word of the successful attack spread around the city, the Belazurans remembered what it had been like ten years before, when they'd still had the will to fight. And as they remembered, their courage returned to them. They laid down their fusioncutters and their servodriverns. They stepped away from their assembly lines of Imperial weapons. Some took to the streets, throwing rocks at their Imperial guards or slamming furniture through the windows of Imperial quarters. Others lit a match. And smoke choked the sky.

As day dropped into night, Luke stood on the hill, watching it happen. Watching a city reclaim its soul. The Empire would fight back; it always did. And maybe it would destroy this uprising as it had destroyed the others.

But as the factories burned and the skies glowed with reflected flames, Luke couldn't help hoping—that this time, the fire would last.

## Chapter Nineteen

Soresh cut off the transmission. So it was over. The garrison was destroyed. X-7 was dead. The ambush was a failure, and the entire city was in upheaval. And Soresh, as the highest-ranking officer on the planet, would be the one held responsible. “No,” he said quietly, shaking his head. “No, no, no. *No*.” He smashed a fist down on the desk, scattering piles of flimsiplast everywhere. This was *not* the way it was supposed to go. He was a loyal servant of the Empire. The *most* loyal. Hadn’t he sacrificed everything for the cause? Years of his life. His family. Even his own son.

After such devotion and such sacrifice, all for the greater glory of the Empire, surely Palpatine would understand.

Everyone made mistakes.

Still, it couldn’t hurt to put as much distance between himself and this disaster as possible. He slipped his private datapad into his pocket and hurried to the door. But when it swung open, a stormtrooper was blocking his path. “I’ll need you to prepare the ship,” he said. “I’m leaving immediately.”

The stormtrooper raised his blaster. “I’m sorry, sir, but that’s not possible.”

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“Not possible? What do you mean? Is something wrong with the ship? I’ll take another. Surely this planet must have a ship!” Soresh realized he was starting to sound hysterical, and forced himself to take a deep breath. “Let me by,” he said in a more commanding voice. “That’s an order.”

“You’re to stay here until he arrives,” the stormtrooper said in that flat, toneless voice they all used.

“Until who arrives?” Soresh asked, not sure he wanted the answer.

“Lord Vader.”

*No.*

He assumed a military posture, shoulders back, chest out, head held high. “Listen to me. I don’t know who you are, but *I* am Commander Rezi Soresh, Imperial sub-overseer of strategic and tactical operations, with dominion over the Inner Rim and all planets contained within. You take orders from me, not Lord Vader. And I’m ordering you to let me pass.”

The stormtrooper didn’t move. Soresh fumed. It was pointless to reason with these stormtroopers. Hiding behind that implacable mask, they had no need to be human. Sometimes, when he stared into that white plastoid armor, it was hard to believe that there even was a real person beneath it. And who knew what lay behind the mask? It could be a man, could be a woman, could be a cold-blooded monster.

Like Vader. No one knew what was behind that black faceplate, but Soresh was certain that whatever it was contained no shred of humanity. Or mercy.

He stepped back into the office and slammed the door, then locked it. He was running out of time.

Soresh had never considered himself the kind of man who would make a fatal mistake. But he *was* the kind of man who planned for every eventuality, even the unlikeliest ones. Which meant he never went anywhere without a backup plan.



## STAR WARS: Trapped

Darth Vader spoke for the Emperor. For Soresh to disobey a direct order would mean violating his sacred oath. By fleeing, he would become an enemy of everything he believed in.

But staying meant certain death. And if he survived, he could atone. He could show the Emperor how loyal he was. How valuable. He could find some way to prove he deserved to live.

*If he survived.*

Soresh pressed the button that swung back the bookshelf and revealed the hidden turbolift. The secret Rebel escape route was the reason he had selected the office for his temporary quarters. Those Belazuran Rebels had apparently been very crafty when it came to surviving. *Not crafty enough*, Soresh thought, and their loss was his gain. The lift was still operational, which meant Vader didn't know about it. Soresh himself knew only because he had done his research and studied the blueprints, as he studied the blueprints of every building he planned to spend significant time in.

And he never arrived on a planet without making sure that he had an alternate way to depart. In this case, it was an old CloakShape fighter stashed in a secure location.

Like all the bullies Soresh had faced over the years, Vader was stronger than him. Bolder. More powerful in every way. Guaranteed to triumph in any face-to-face confrontation. But, like all the other bullies, Vader had overlooked one very important fact.

Soresh was smarter.

It was all the advantage he would need.

"Mug of lum for your thoughts, kid?" Han asked, joining Luke at the galley's small table. He slid a foaming glass toward Luke, but Luke waved it away. Han shook his head, then gulped it down himself, draining the glass in two swallows. "You look like you could use some distraction."

"I could use some *privacy*," Luke muttered, but he wasn't about to get that any time soon. The *Millennium Falcon* was full to

## Alex Wheeler

capacity, and more. Five humans, two droids, and a Wookiee were proving to be more than even the *Falcon* could handle. At least as far as Luke was concerned. But maybe that was just because he was stuck sharing his bunk with Div and Ferus. Div's permanent glower made it clear that he would rather be somewhere—anywhere else. And Ferus...well, Luke trusted him, even liked him, but there was something uncomfortably intense about the man's stare. It was like he could see right through to the center of Luke—and was judging whether Luke was worthy.

Worthy of what, Luke didn't know.

"Smile, kid," Han recommended. "The good guys won, the bad guys are two meters under. Not bad for a day's work, eh?"

"Not bad," Luke agreed, but his heart wasn't in it.

X-7 was dead. The man who'd betrayed him, who'd tried to kill him again and again was gone. And a major Imperial base was gone with him. Han was right, it was time to celebrate. Not to stare moodily into space, as he'd been doing for the last several hours.

"So what is it?" Han asked. He leaned back in his chair and kicked his feet up on the table. Luke wondered how it would feel to be Han, to float through life without a care in the world. No ties, no responsibilities, no burdens—no fear.

Luke couldn't imagine.

He shrugged. "I'm just wondering what's next."

"Next?" Han grinned. "Next we get ourselves back to Yavin 4 and breathe some nice, clean, Imperial-free air. We stop looking over our shoulders wondering when some crazy assassin's going to shoot you from behind a tree. And I wouldn't mind a nice big juicy nerf steak while we're at it."

"I mean after that," Luke explained. "X-7's not the end of it. There's never an end of it." There never would be, not until the Empire had fallen. Life had become one battle after another, one death after another. He had told himself that something would change once X-7 was dead.

He was tired.

## STAR WARS: Trapped

"You can't think about that kind of thing," Han said. "Forget about what might happen, and—"

"Easy for you to say!" Luke exploded. "*Everything's* easy for you. But some of us actually care about the Rebellion, and about...other people," he finished lamely, reluctant to name names. "We can't just dash off to some other part of the galaxy when things don't go our way."

Han stood up, his face red. "Listen, kid, I don't know who you've been talking to, but nothing about my life is *easy*. And if you weren't such a—" He stopped himself and drew in a deep breath. "You know the difference between you and me, kid?"

Luke sighed. "I'm sure you're going to tell me."

Han slapped Luke on the back. Hard. "Right you are." He sat down again. "You think I've got nothing on my mind? I'll tell you what I've got: a bounty on my head worth more credits than you'll see in your entire life. Not to mention a very angry Hutt who probably wants me skinned alive and hung on his trophy wall. Trust me, kid, I got troubles. But the difference between you and me is that I know when to forget about them. You're right, something *always* happens next—and it's never something good. But it's going to happen whether you worry about it or not. So when you get a day like this, everything actually going right and no one trying to kill you? Better enjoy it while it lasts, that's what I say."

"You may be right," Luke admitted.

"Always am," Han pointed out. "Don't see why now should be any different."

Han had a point. So when Leia and Ferus joined them in the galley for food and drink, Luke joined into the festivities. When C-3PO and R2-D2 started bickering and Chewbacca threatened to rip their gears out if they didn't quiet down, Luke laughed along with everyone else. But his smile was strained.

Somewhere out there in the dark, something was waiting.

*Waiting for me*, Luke thought, uneasy.

*Coming for me*.

## Alex Wheeler

When he turned back to the group, Ferus was watching him, as usual. Something about the older man's expression convinced him: Ferus felt it, too.

But Han was right, there was nothing to be done about it...now. Luke tried his best to shake off the dark cloud. Whatever came next, he would face it. *They* would face it, together. And in the meantime, he had his friends, he had his moment of triumph—and peace.

So maybe he would do exactly as Han said.

*Enjoy it while it lasts.*

Darth Vader swept down the hallway, his cape flowing behind him. Stormtroopers lined the corridor, shrinking away as he passed. The stench of fear oozed out of them, and Vader breathed it in greedily. Their terror made him stronger, gave power to the dark Force within him. Another day, he might have paused to toy with them. Strike one down and watch the rest scatter like fearful sand skitters. But this was not the time for games.

A man had dared to defy him; that man would be destroyed.

He threw open the doors of Soresh's chamber. But there was no one there but a young lieutenant, rifling through the sheets of flimsiplast strewn across the desk. "Where is he?" Vader said, anger percolating deep within.

The man trembled. "He...h-he...We don't know, my lord," he stammered. "He was here, but now..."

"You were ordered to hold him for my arrival," Vader said.

"We stationed guards, but..." The man shook his head. His face was drained of color. He was young, little more than a boy. This was probably his first assignment.

"But *he is gone!*" Vader roared, and let the anger overtake him. The boy's eyes bulged. His face flushed red. His hands crept to his neck. His mouth fell open, his tongue hanging out like that of a hungry mastiff.

Vader boiled. *Defied*, by a coward like Rezi Soresh. Because of the sheer incompetence of those who served him. It was an *insult*,

## STAR WARS: Trapped

an *offense*. It could not be allowed. He let the dark side flow through him, let its shadow fill the room with its enormous power. He nurtured the anger, feeding it, feeling it swell within him.

The boy gasped. One last breath.

And then he dropped to the ground, eyes open, chest still.

The rage quieted. Vader was satisfied. For the moment.

But Soresh was still out there, willfully defying him, and perhaps still pursuing the Rebel Luke Skywalker, even though it had been expressly forbidden. Vader would find him, stop him.

But first Vader would punish him.

He spread his consciousness out into the corners of the room, letting it merge with the Force, exploring this pathetic world with its prying tendrils, searching for some hint to where Soresh might have gone. But it wasn't Soresh that he sensed. It was something else—something familiar. He had felt it several times these last few months, but always faintly. He hadn't been sure. But now he was.

The past tickled at the edges of his mind. He had felt this presence before, long ago. Then he had been weak, still afraid to face what he had become. Still imprisoned by the memories of Anakin Skywalker.

No more. The past held no danger for him, not anymore. Facing Obi-Wan Kenobi had been deeply satisfying, knowing he had extinguished his light forever. There was only one other man in the galaxy whose death would give him as much satisfaction. For years, Vader had assumed he was already dead. But now...

Behind his mask, Vader drew his lips back in a predatory smile.

*It's been a long time, old friend,* he thought. *Too long.*

*See you soon.*











***Uprising***  
BY ALEX WHEELER





## Chapter One

The moon was dead.

A film of red dust lay over the cratered land. Nothing disturbed the still, acrid air. There was no sound; there was no movement. There was only scorched, flat ground stretching to the bare horizon. If life had flourished here once, that time was long over. Erased, all traces of creature or creation wiped out.

Gone.

And so there was no one to see the bright star that skimmed across the horizon, nearly invisible in the light of the rising sun.

There was no one to understand that the star was a ship, circling the moon. Its first visitor in millennia.

Certainly there was no one to recognize the ion trail as that of a rusty old CloakShape fighter.

Unseen, the CloakShape orbited the moon, spiraling closer and closer to the thin atmosphere.

And inside, Commander Rezi Soresh—former Imperial Commander, current fugitive—stared blindly into space, and waited to die.

Twenty-seven days, sixteen hours, and four minutes.

## Alex Wheeler

That was how long he'd been waiting. Ever since Darth Vader had convinced the Emperor he was a traitor, Rezi Soresh had been on the run.

He snorted. *On the run*. What a joke. *On the crawl* was more like it. Hobbling from one star system to the next. Creeping through the shadows. Desperately scrounging for food, for shelter, for ships. One month before, he had been one of the most powerful men in the galaxy. Then he'd been blamed for the disaster on Belazura—even though it hadn't been *his* mistake that got the Imperial garrison destroyed. The ambush of the Rebels *should* have worked. *Would* have worked, if it hadn't been for the Jedi scum. And even so, it wasn't his fault. Darth Vader had twisted the facts, convinced the Emperor that Soresh was incompetent, maybe even a traitor. All because Vader was jealous of Soresh's power. If Soresh hadn't had a backup escape plan, he would be dead.

But life wasn't worth much anymore. Thanks to the Rebel vermin and the vengeful Dark Lord, Soresh was nothing. Less than nothing.

He was prey.

There were those who believed that the galaxy was teeming with life. Fools. The galaxy was a vast and empty wasteland, small outposts of civilization sprinkled through trillions of kilometers of void. Rezi Soresh was no fool—he knew how to use the emptiness. He knew how to hide.

But Vader was no fool, either, and Soresh had never expected to survive this long. Gradually, as he drifted aimlessly through the wilds of the Outer Rim, something had changed in him. Something had awoken, something he'd never expected to have again: Hope.

Perhaps he was as smart as he'd thought. Perhaps Vader wasn't as powerful as he'd feared. Perhaps he had a chance to save himself, and reclaim his rightful position at the Emperor's side. To get revenge on his enemies.

## STAR WARS: Uprising

He had stumbled upon this moon by chance—but perhaps it was destiny.

Soresh dropped altitude and skimmed over the arid land, surveying his new home. It would take time to build a new base of power. It would take resources. But he had ample amounts of both. There were still sources he could risk trusting, secrets he could use to manipulate, to blackmail, to obtain what he needed. As one of the Emperor's most valued advisors, he'd been trusted with a large discretionary fund. Over the years, Soresh had siphoned the money into more than a hundred accounts. He had cultivated a cadre of underlings who would be loyal only to him. He had collected black market information, and knew more about his enemies than they knew about themselves. For one standard month, he had lived as a dead man, afraid to risk any contact with his old life. But living in fear, drifting through nowhere, endlessly *waiting*—it was no better than death. And it was no longer tolerable.

As always, he would be patient, and he would be careful. Soresh knew how his enemies saw him. They thought he was a narrow man, cowardly, paranoid, more comfortable with a datapad than a blaster.

They were right. But they failed to understand that these were not weaknesses; they were his greatest strengths. In the end, they would allow him to rise from the nearly dead. They would allow him to strike back. He would take them all down, all his enemies, all the ones responsible for stranding him here in this brutal no-man's-land.

He didn't have a plan, not yet. But he knew where his revenge would begin. He would start with the one who had started it all, the man who had been the beginning of Soresh's end.

Luke Skywalker.

## Chapter Two

Did you say something?” Luke whispered.

“What part of *quiet* don’t you understand?” Han Solo hissed.

“I thought I heard my name,” Luke said.

“Well, maybe you should *think* a little more quietly,” Han snarled.

Chewbacca growled at them.

Luke shut his mouth. When a Wookiee carrying a giant bowcaster shushes you, you take his advice. Especially when he’s the only thing standing between you and a roomful of soldiers with blasters.

Luke sighed. Back on Yavin 4, this had sounded like such an easy mission. Go to the Royal Palace of Nyemari, grab the duchess’s access codes for the Nyemari Imperial Military Installation, get out. He didn’t understand how it had all gone so wrong so fast. Much less how he and Han had ended up crammed into a shoe closet, with only a thin curtain of Dramassian shimmersilk separating them from the duchess’s guards. A thin curtain and, of course, Chewbacca, who was posing as a guard himself. Apparently, to most Nyemarians, all Wookiees looked alike.

## STAR WARS: Uprising

As usual, Han had been determined to blast his way out of trouble, but Luke and Leia had convinced him to wait. Their orders were to infiltrate—sight unseen. And Leia had insisted they follow orders. Of course, that was before Leia set off to explore the west wing of the palace while Han and Luke took the north and south. She should have rendezvoused with them an hour before, but there was no sign of her. Luke tried not to worry. Leia could take care of herself. Still...

“Do you think we should go find her?” Luke whispered.

Han smiled crookedly. “If I know the princess—”

There was a deafening crash and explosion of plaster as a sleek black airspeeder barreled straight through the wall. The room erupted in chaos as guards fled from the oncoming speeder. Laserfire from its forward cannons peppered the room, blasting holes in antique wallpaper, the clari-crystalline vases, and several dozen shoe boxes.

“—she’ll find us,” Han finished, as he burst out of the shoe closet, blaster blazing.

“What are you waiting for?” Leia cried, urging them into the speeder. White plaster dust coated her braided brown hair.

Luke, Han, and Chewbacca piled in. A phalanx of guards poured into the room. Laserbolts screamed through the air.

“We have to get out of here!” Luke shouted over the noise of battle. He whirled around to send a stream of laserfire at their pursuers. The speeder lifted off the ground.

“Thanks for the brilliant idea!” Leia aimed the speeder straight for the giant transparisteel window. “Duck!”

Luke cradled his head and braced for impact. A shower of transparisteel rained down on them as they hurtled into open air. Two stories below, a fleet of Royal speeder bikes lifted off the ground and gave chase. Leia increased thrust and they shot forward at 650 km/hr.

“I thought you wanted us to do this *quietly*,” Han shouted over the engine roar.

## Alex Wheeler

“Change of plans.” Leia jerked the stolen speeder hard to the right, tipping so precariously they nearly toppled out of the vehicle. She wove skillfully through the maze of skyscrapers, blasting through buildings when she couldn’t go around them. The Royal guards were determined, but they couldn’t match Leia’s piloting skills. “You complaining?”

“Not today,” Han teased.

“Feel free to let yourself out,” Leia snapped.

Han stretched out in the seat, hands behind his head. “I’m fine right where I am, Your Worship. You can rescue me any day of the week.” He coughed loudly, adding under his breath, “Especially when it’s your fault we needed rescuing in the first place.”

“*Excuse me?*” Leia said.

“*I said—*”

Chewbacca cut Han off with a loud roar. Luke gave the Wookiee a friendly slap on the back. “I’m with Chewbacca,” he said. “How about we escape now, argue later?” *Or never*, he added silently. After months of crisscrossing the galaxy with Han and Leia, he was ready for a break.

“In that case, I suggest you hold on.” Leia yanked the controls to the right, angling them on a collision course with a thirty-story tower. Luke clung to his seat as Leia pulled back hard. The speeder lurched into a vertical climb, hugging the side of the building. Far below, Imperial speeder bikes skidded and smashed into duracrete as they made clumsy attempts to follow. Leia ignored them. She hunched over the controls, eyes laser-focused on the narrow course ahead of her. There was little for Luke to do but admire her graceful flying as she steered them through the city-sized obstacle course. Their remaining pursuers quickly fell behind, lost in a forest of duracrete and transparisteel.

Soon they were alone in the sky, emerging from the dense city center into an empty stretch of land at the fringe of the capital. The *Millennium Falcon* was parked at a hangar only a few kilometers away.



## STAR WARS: Uprising

“Now,” Leia said to Han, relaxing her grip on the controls once the danger had passed, “I’d like you to explain *exactly* how this was all my fault.”

“You *were* the one who tripped the silent alarm.”

“Only because *you* were the one who tripped over your own two feet and knocked me into it.”

“Are you calling me clumsy?”

“Of course not! I’m calling you a clumsy, blaster-brained nerf-herder.”

Luke sighed and leaned back in his seat. It was going to be a long ride home.

Anem, the capital city of Nyemari, was home to the most modern, architecturally sophisticated spaceport in the Meridian Sector.

Han refused to take the *Millennium Falcon* within a hundred kilometers of it.

Instead, he’d docked the ship at the South Anem Spaceport. It was little more than a large warehouse, built in the no-man’s-land where the city bled into the desert. Its equipment and fixtures hadn’t been replaced or repaired in three decades. These days, no one bothered to use it but grizzled spacers, smugglers, and any other unsavory characters with shadowy business on Nyemari.

In other words, it was Han’s kind of place.

Li Preni, a Nyemarian who’d been fixing up ships at South Anem Spaceport for years, owed Han a favor. And he’d sworn on his life that he’d take care of the *Millennium Falcon*. But Han didn’t trust anyone to take care of his ship—especially not a Nyemarian who’d sell out his own mother for a bottle of lum. The *Falcon* might not look like much, with her crumbling shield projectors and wonky power generators, but treat her right and she’d be your best friend. She was the fastest ship in the galaxy, and Han never felt quite right when she was out of his sight.

But as they approached the main hangar, things felt less right than usual.

## Alex Wheeler

It wasn't anything specific. Just a certainty, in his gut, that something was wrong. And Han always trusted his gut—that was why he was still alive. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on their ends. Shadows flickered at the corners of his vision. He swore he heard footsteps behind them, but every time he spun around, the street was clear.

"Calm down," Leia said. "Your precious ship isn't going anywhere."

"What is it, Han?" Luke asked, sounding concerned.

Say what you wanted about the kid and his Jedi hokum, Luke understood gut feelings. But Han shook his head. If he was right, and yet another bounty hunter was on his tail, that wasn't Luke's problem. Luke wasn't the one who'd double-crossed the biggest, ugliest, meanest Hutt this side of the galactic core. Han had been fending off Jabba's minions for months, and he wasn't about to let another one ruin his day.

"Didn't expect to see you back so soon," Li Preni said, as soon as he caught sight of Han. The Nyemarian scurried over, looking shifty and up to no good. But there was nothing unusual about that.

"Didn't expect to see me back at *all*, you mean," Han said. He knew Li Preni wanted the *Falcon* for himself. In fact, Han was half convinced that Preni had been the one to tip off the duchess that they were infiltrating the palace.

"Might have been a better plan," the Nyemarian hissed, leaning in close. Han gagged on Preni's thick, putrid breath. It smelled like a rotting bantha carcass. "Someone's been looking for you."

"Looking for *us*?" Luke said nervously. "Who?"

But Han was unsurprised—his gut was never wrong. "Was it that Farghul bounty hunter slug?" he asked. "You'd think he learned his lesson back on Iridonia."

Preni shook his head. "Just some Glymphid. Offered a big bounty if anyone could point him toward the crew of the *Falcon*."

"And what did you tell him?" Leia asked.

## STAR WARS: Uprising

"Told him I never heard of you," Preni said.

Chewbacca growled and took a step closer to the Nyemarian. A big step.

"Okay, okay!" Preni squeaked. "I may have told him you were in town. But I didn't say you were coming back today, I swear!"

"Only because you didn't know," Han growled.

"Forget him," Leia said. "Let's get out of here before whoever it is comes back."

"Better idea," Han said, drawing his blaster out of its holster. "Let's stick around."

"Han..." Luke tapped the pouch containing the stolen access codes, a reminder that they had more important things to do.

"Don't gimme that look, kid," Han said wearily. They were exactly the same, Luke and Leia, always telling him to *stop, think, wait. Be patient.*

Well, now it was *their* turn to be patient. It was past time to send a message to Jabba. And Han decided this Glymphid was just the guy to deliver it.

## Chapter Three

Leia wanted to throttle Han. As usual. He was acting like they hadn't just spent three days on the run. Like there was no rush to get the access codes off the planet and back to Yavin 4—much less get *themselves* off the planet before the duchess's forces figured out where they were.

*How did I get here?* Leia asked herself, not for the first time. Once, the Rebel Alliance had been her only priority. Destroying the Empire had been all she cared about. Then, out of nowhere, Luke and Han had dropped into her life. Destroying the Empire still mattered—but so did they.

Which was why, fuming, she followed Han out of the hangar and back into the alleyways of Anem. Good friends were hard to find—and even harder to ignore when they were about to do something stupid.

"This way," Han hissed, stepping over a heap of rotting acid-beets. "I think I saw the guy slip around the corner." Chewbacca's tracking skills and Han's "gut" guided them through the maze of narrow streets. The pavement was cracked and uneven, frequently giving way to rubble. Leia couldn't believe how different this area was from the dense city center, with its glossy, crystalline skyscrapers. There, everything had

been smooth and silver. Here, every building was a patchwork of bright colors and mismatched materials. Market stalls dotted each corner, hawking forrolow berries, krayt dragonskin pouches, and small pourstone statues of the duchess. The rich, sweet scent of roasting hambones choked the air. In the city center, speeders jockeyed for space at death-defying speeds. But here, the only traffic was a line of sallow creatures that looked like lumpy, bloated eopie, and the occasional wild pack of roaming voorpaks.

As for the alien they were tailing: More than once, Leia caught a glimpse of a long proboscis or scaled leg disappearing around a corner. But it was always too quick to be caught, too slow to escape them completely. Something was wrong.

But Han wouldn't be stopped. He led them into a cramped alleyway, zigzagging through heaping dumpsters. The heavy stink of rotting garbage was overwhelming. Leia held her breath, walking faster and faster until she was nearly running. She pushed past Han and exploded out of the alley, drawing in a desperate breath of clean air. She nearly choked on it when she spotted the Glymphid standing only a few meters away, his finger extended toward Han.

"Found you!" the Glymphid hissed. The alien was tall and thin, with tan, scaly limbs and suction cups at the end of each narrow finger and toe. Red eyes peered out over a long, sharp snout.

"Worst mistake you ever made," Han drawled. They had landed in a dusty, disused plaza. A decrepit fountain sat in the middle, spigots dry and rusting. They were completely alone with the Glymphid. Leia was suddenly sure that was no accident. "Now, you go back to Jabba and—"

"I have something for you," the alien interrupted, rushing toward them on gangly legs. "Wait!" he yelped, freezing as three blasters and a bowcaster were leveled at him. The alien raised his hands in the air. "It's just a message. I don't even have weapons. You can search me."

"Jabba sent *me* a message?" Han asked.

## Alex Wheeler

“Not you,” the Glymphid said. “Him.” He extended a long, suction-tipped finger toward Luke.

Without thinking, Leia stepped in between Luke and the Glymphid. “What do you want with him?” she asked.

“Him?” Han said, eyes wide. His head swiveled back and forth between Luke and the alien. “You *sure* it’s him?”

The Glymphid pulled out a datapad. “The human traveling with the *Millennium Falcon*, pale hair, low intelligence—”

“Hey!” Luke exclaimed. Han snorted. Leia shoved him.

“—answers to the name of Luke.”

“That’s you all right, kid,” Han said grudgingly.

“I been looking for you for a long time,” the Glymphid said. “And it’s worth a big reward for me if you just listen to this message.” He thrust a holochip and small holoplayer in Luke’s face.

“What do you think?” Luke asked.

Leia narrowed her eyes at the Glymphid. “We need more information before we can—”

“Let me see that.” Han seized the equipment. Before Leia could stop him, he shoved the chip into the player and switched it on.

A shadowy, translucent figure appeared before them, his face masked by a hood. “Luke Skywalker, we finally meet.”

“Who is that?” Luke said, staring at the hooded man. He turned to the alien. “Who sent you?”

Taking advantage of their distraction, the Glymphid was creeping away. Han clamped a hand on his shoulder, and dug a blaster into his back. “Not so fast, buddy. How ’bout you stick around while we watch this. Then you’re going to answer all our questions.”

“I don’t know anything,” the alien squeaked. “I swear.”

“I’ve been hunting you for a long time,” the mysterious figure said. His voice was narrow and pinched. “I believe you know a friend of mine, X-7.”

## STAR WARS: Uprising

Leia gasped. X-7 had been a skilled assassin hired to kill Luke, and he'd nearly succeeded, more than once. X-7 had been dead for months—but the man who sent him was still out there. Rezi Soresh, the Imperial Commander who'd devoted himself to destroying Luke. Apparently he hadn't given up.

"Meeting you proved rather inconvenient for him," the man continued. "Hopefully, our encounter will end more happily. For me, at least. Now, down to business." He clapped his hands together sharply. His hologram faded into a harsh red landscape of rocks and craters. The camera settled on a group of twenty people, huddled together behind a fence bristling with electric current. Men and women held each other. Small children clung to their mothers' knees. Their faces all bore the same expression: Terror.

"These are some of the passengers of the Arkanian ship *Endeavor*. Settlers—one hundred men, women, and children—headed for a new life on a new world. I'm afraid I forced them to take a slight detour. I'm sure they're eager to get on their way again—and they can. As soon as you deliver yourself to me. At the end of this holorecording, you'll find a set of galactic coordinates. You have twelve standard hours to reach them—or I promise you, all my guests will die an extremely painful death. You will *not* tell anyone else about this. If you disobey these instructions, the poor settlers will die." The camera zoomed in on a small child's face, his muddy cheeks streaked with tears. "All of them." The hooded figure wagged a finger at them.

Leia kept her eyes fixed on Luke. She could imagine how he felt. Whenever she closed her eyes at night, she still saw herself on the bridge of the Death Star, watching her beloved Alderaan on the viewscreen. Giving Vader and Governor Tarkin what they wanted hadn't helped, even though she'd told only a half-truth. It hadn't stopped them from proceeding with their "effective demonstration." It hadn't saved Alderaan.

She knew what it meant to have all those lives in your hands, and to be unable to save them. It didn't matter how many people

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told you it wasn't your fault. It didn't matter if you knew, logically, there was nothing you could have done. If anything happened to those settlers, Luke would never forgive himself.

Leia knew that better than anyone.

"Don't think that you can disobey me just because I'm halfway across the galaxy," the man said. "As of now, I'm watching you. And my reach is further than you might expect. Perhaps you'd appreciate a little demonstration...."

But he didn't move. He didn't do anything.

"Impressive," Han sneered.

And then the Glymphid screamed.

"What did you do to him?" Leia cried.

"Nothing!" Han shouted, as the alien began shaking in Han's grasp. He dropped to the ground, jerking and twitching. His eyes rolled back in his head. Snorts of pain exploded from his snout.

"We have to help him!" Luke exclaimed. He knelt by the alien's side, but there was nothing he could do.

A wracking shudder tore through the Glymphid's body. A long, low sigh wheezed out of his lungs—and then, nothing.

Luke pressed his ear against the alien's still chest, then rose, looking somber. "He's gone."

"Explain to me again what we're doing here?" Lune Divinian said, hoisting a load of duracrete blocks over his shoulder. The Yavin 4 sun was beating down with unusual strength. Sweat matted his shirt to the back of his neck.

"We're offering crucial assistance to the effort to destroy the Empire," Ferus Olin reminded him.

"We're building 'freshers," Div argued. "Not exactly heroic labor."

Ferus lowered himself down to the ground with a soft grunt. "All labor is heroic," he said. But the words rang slightly hollow. His muscles ached with the strain of the heavy lifting. Even his bones ached. It was tempting to call upon the Force to help ease the job along. But they were working on a heavily trafficked path.



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Anyone could pass by and catch him calling on his old Jedi skills. Ferus couldn't risk it.

"When you suckered me into joining up with this Rebellion, this isn't exactly the kind of work I had in mind," Div complained.

It wasn't what Ferus had in mind, either. After hiding out for two decades, he was eager to *act*. It had been a hard decision to join the Rebellion, as he couldn't risk anything interfering with his primary mission, protecting Leia. But in the end, there was no real choice. If he didn't do everything in his power to destroy the Empire, he wouldn't be able to live with himself. And he knew Div felt the same.

Which didn't mean he'd signed up for refresher building.

"It's going to take them a while to trust us," Ferus said. "Surely you can understand that."

They had both seen what happened when a rebellion trusted too much, too fast. That made it all too easy for enemies to slip under the radar and ruin everything.

"I just don't see how this is helping anyone," Div said. "If we told them what we could do—"

"We can't," Ferus said. "You know that." The Rebels weren't the only ones slow to trust. No one could know that Div had once been a Force-sensitive child, groomed to be a Jedi. As no one could know that Ferus had grown up in the Jedi Temple, training with the great Obi-Wan Kenobi and Yoda himself. "Besides, just because they want to keep us out of the loop doesn't mean we need to let them."

He spied a scruffy redhead making his way through the woods, and flagged him down. Jono Moroni spent most of his time on the Rebel Base doing janitorial work alongside the droids. He was a quiet man who kept to himself, and few people seemed to even notice him. But Ferus's Jedi Masters had long ago taught him the value of silent observers. Jono faded into the background, which meant he saw more than people knew. And he wasn't unwilling to pass it along.

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“Good afternoon, Jono,” Ferus called out. “How goes it?”

“Couldn’t be better,” Jono said. Over the last few weeks, Ferus had grown to truly respect the man. He was unfailingly friendly and cheerful. It was clear nothing made him happier than serving the Rebellion. And it turned out that he was only quiet because no one ever bothered to speak to him. Once you got him going, he could talk for hours.

Ferus peppered him with questions about the weather and his recent bout of Balmorra Flu. Gradually, he moved the conversation in the direction he needed it to go. “Things must be busy over at Massassi Station, given what’s going on now?” It was a safe question—things were *always* busy at the Rebel Base station.

Jono nodded eagerly. “Course, I shouldn’t talk about it.”

But Ferus needed him to talk about it. And so he reached out with the Force and loosened Jono’s tongue. “You’d like to tell us about it,” Ferus suggested pleasantly.

“I’d like to tell you about it,” Jono echoed in a fuzzy voice.

Div looked disgusted. It was one thing to use the Force against one’s enemies. Using it to wring information from a friend... Surely that wasn’t the Jedi way. But Ferus wouldn’t allow himself to feel guilty. He couldn’t help the Rebels unless he knew what help they needed.

Still, such decisions were easier to make in the old days. As a Jedi Padawan it had been simple to know the right thing to do. Right was whatever his Master told him it was. Only after leaving the Temple had Ferus learned the joy of deciding such things for himself. But, like all true joys, it came with a healthy dose of terror. Div knew that, too, in his own way.

“Could be I heard something, while I was mopping up,” Jono said hesitantly.

Ferus gave him an encouraging nod.

“Rebel scouts intercepted an encrypted Imperial transmission,” Jono confided. “The Imperial High Command is having some kind of top secret meeting in a few weeks, out in

the middle of nowhere. Emperor's going. Darth Vader, too. And because they're doing it in secret, they're traveling light. Only a couple Star Destroyers. Sounds like General Dodonna thinks this could be our chance to take down the Empire, all in one shot."

Div scowled. "Great. A top secret mission to take out the Emperor and Vader, and you know where we'll be? Building 'freshers."

Ferus frowned, but for a different reason. "Thank you, Jono. Always good to talk to you. Now it might be nice for you to go back to your quarters and lie down for a bit."

Jono furrowed his brow, looking slightly confused. "Kind of hot out here," he said. "Think I might head back to my quarters and lie down for a bit."

"Sounds like a good idea," Ferus said. *I'm sorry, friend*, he thought, as Jono wended his way through the forest and disappeared into the trees. *You deserve better.*

But he'd learned something—possibly something crucial. "What do you think?" Ferus asked Div.

"I think we're wasting our time out here when we could be—"

"No," Ferus said impatiently. It was growing harder and harder to remember the sweet, young boy Lune Divinian had once been. He'd grown into a hardened, cynical young man. A *good* man—but often, it seemed like he wanted to pretend that goodness didn't exist. Much as he wanted to pretend that his connection to the Force no longer existed. Ferus could understand that. When you'd had great power as a child, only to watch it disappear as you grew, it was tempting to forget you ever had it at all. Ferus had spent many years trying to rebuild his connection to the Force, but he knew he would never regain all he'd lost. "Put aside your impatience and your bitterness. Take a moment. What do you think about what we've just learned? What do you *feel*?"

Div sighed with irritation, but he did as he was told. He closed his eyes and bowed his head. When he looked up, a few moments later, his eyes were bright and clear. "Something's off,"

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he said. "But I can't put my finger on it. That kind of information, just falling into the Rebellion's lap...?"

"I agree," Ferus said. "It's almost too easy."

"We are due for some good luck," Div pointed out.

"Not likely," Ferus mused. It would be nice to believe that the galaxy had finally smiled upon the Rebellion. But doubt gnawed at him. Something felt very wrong about this news. A great pressure seemed to weigh down on him, as if the dark side was settling on Yavin 4, thickening the air, spreading its poison.

"Maybe it's time for us to get out," Div said. "You think something bad's coming, I can tell—seems like a good time to get out, while the getting's good. Go save the galaxy from somewhere else."

"You don't mean that," Ferus said.

Div opened his mouth—but shut it again, before arguing.

"We've got some time," Ferus said. "We can figure this out."

"And if it's a trap?"

"Then we do whatever we have to do to keep the Rebels from flying straight into it," Ferus said, hoping he sounded more confident than he felt. He told himself there was no reason for the dark chasm of hopelessness that had opened within him.

*At least the princess is far away from here, Ferus reassured himself. Whatever happens, she'll be safe.*

## Chapter Four

**H**an, Luke, Leia, and Chewbacca gaped at the dead Glymphid.

Luke cleared his throat nervously. "You don't think...I mean, there's no way a holorecording could..."

"Coincidence," Han said, watching the holoplayer like it was going to bite him. "Had to be."

Chewbacca growled in agreement.

"I've heard of delayed-release poisons," Leia said. "Maybe activating the holoplayer triggered something?"

"Maybe we should leave before it triggers something *else*," Han suggested.

Luke stared at the coordinates that the hooded man had given them. "This is halfway across the galaxy," he said. "Even if we leave right now, we might not make it there in time."

"That's assuming we go at all," Han said. "You want to walk straight into a trap?"

"I'm not going to just leave those people to die!" Luke said indignantly.

"And I'm not looking to die with them," Han shot back. "Self-sacrifice isn't in my vocabulary, kid."

"Then I'll go without you," Luke said.

"Oh, yeah?" Han grinned. "In what ship?"

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Luke glared at him, furious. Whenever he let himself believe that Han cared about anyone but himself, something like this would happen.

"Let's slow down," Leia said. "We should contact the Rebel base, let them know what happened, see what they—"

"No!" Luke exclaimed. "Didn't you hear Soresh? If we disobey him and tell anyone what's happening—"

"It's a bluff, kid," Han said. "No one's watching."

"How do *you* know?" Luke asked. He glanced at the dead alien. "I bet *he* didn't think anyone was watching, either. And now look at him. I'm not going to let anyone else die because of me."

"This is *not* your fault," Leia insisted. "And if anything happens to those hostages, that's not your fault, either. You can't control what some maniac decided to do."

"Maybe I can't control it," Luke agreed. "But I can stop it. And I'm going to." None of them understood, maybe because it hadn't been *their* name on the holovid. This was all happening because of him. Because for whatever reason, this insane Imperial wanted Luke Skywalker, and was willing to kill. *Enough people have died to protect me*, Luke thought. Images of his aunt's and uncle's smoldering bodies, of Darth Vader's lightsaber slicing through Obi-Wan Kenobi, flashed through his mind.

*Enough.*

"Fine," Leia said. "But you're not doing it alone."

Chewbacca hooted with enthusiasm. He was always eager for battle. Which left only one.

Leia fixed Han with a steely glare. Stubbornly, he met her gaze. Then he sighed.

"Your wish is my command, Princess," Han said wearily. "But if we do this, we do it my way. We're not just delivering the kid up to the slaughter. We've got to be smart."

"Smart?" Leia raised her eyebrows. "I thought you said you wanted to do this your way."

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Han lowered the *Millennium Falcon* into the atmosphere, surveying the moon's features.

There weren't any.

People talked about "the middle of nowhere," but Han realized that he'd never actually been there—until now. Soresh's coordinates had led them to the Sixela system, a forgotten wasteland deep in the Outer Rim. The moon of the third planet around the blue giant star was habitable but uninhabited, and Han could see why. There was nothing on the ground but rocks and dust. The instruments indicated only one concentration of life, a small outpost at the moon's equator. Han projected the image on the viewscreen. It was a cluster of small, fortresslike buildings surrounded by the electrified pens they'd seen on the holovid. Large laser cannon installations surrounded the pens, aimed at the prisoners. But there was no indication of any other weapons systems or planetary defense.

Han grinned. Whoever this Soresh was, he clearly didn't know how to lay an ambush. This was going to be a piece of puff cake.

"Pardon me, Captain Solo?" Luke's golden protocol droid walked stiffly into the cockpit. His astromech counterpart wheeled in beside him "Are you absolutely sure you wish to take such a rash course of action?" C-3PO asked, for the hundredth time. "Perhaps if you would let me negotiate with the Imperial Commander? After all, I am a protocol droid, well versed in forty-seven forms of hostage negotiation—"

"You don't negotiate when someone's got a blaster to your head," Han said impatiently. "You use a bigger blaster."

The astromech droid, R2-D2, beeped and whirred.

"Yes, Artoo, I'm sure Captain Solo *does* know what he's doing. I simply wanted—"

R2-D2 issued a high whistle.

"Oh, really?" C-3PO said. "And when exactly is the last time *you* used a blaster?"

The astromech droid beeped a response.

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"I most certainly will *not*," C-3PO said huffily. "Why don't *you* jam a restraining bolt in your—"

"Enough!" Han shouted. "I can't think with you two yammering in my ear."

"Certainly, Captain Solo," C-3PO said, offended but obsequious. "We'll leave it to you."

"Good," Han growled. He prepared the ship for landing. The laser cannons were armed and ready, and his blaster, as always, was by his side. "I've got some negotiating to do."

Han set the *Falcon* down on the moon, about half a klick from the hostages. A solitary figure stood in the red sand, waiting.

"Stay here and stay out of trouble," Han instructed the droids. Then he and Chewbacca disembarked. The air was thin and choked with dust, but breathable. The man standing before him wore a hood over his face and carried an ancient triple blaster. It hung loosely at his side.

"Greetings, Captain Solo," he said. "Welcome to my kingdom."

"So you're Soresh?" Han said.

The man nodded. He took a few steps toward the *Falcon*.

Han raised his own blaster and aimed it toward the Imperial. "How about you stay where you are and I stay where I am until this is settled," he suggested.

"I have no argument with you," Soresh said. "I trust you've brought Luke."

"I have," Han said. His finger tensed on the blaster trigger. He was the one who had come up with this plan—but that didn't mean he was sure it would work. Not that he would ever admit as much out loud.

"And where might he be?" Soresh asked, in a pinched voice.

"He might be inside the ship," Han allowed. As he spoke, an X-wing fighter roared into the atmosphere, laser cannons blazing. Right on time. Han grinned. "Then again, he might not."



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A second X-wing followed on the tail of the first. They spiraled through the air, strafing the weapons embankments with carefully aimed bursts of laserfire. One after the other, the cannons exploded. The hostages cheered.

"You don't realize what you've done," Soresh said, raising his blaster.

But, distracted by the surprise attack, he moved too slowly. Han fired first, and his aim was true. Soresh flew backward, scorch marks spreading across his chest. The Imperial's shot went wild, sending a harmless burst of laserfire into the sky. He landed several meters away, kicking up a cloud of red dust. Han approached the body, blaster at the ready, but Soresh didn't move. His eyes gazed sightlessly up at the sky; his chest lay perfectly still. He was dead.

It was over.

Luke couldn't believe everything had gone so smoothly. By all reports, Commander Rezi Soresh was some kind of strategic genius—but apparently his skills were overrated. Because there was Soresh, lying on the ground dead, his plans destroyed in under five minutes.

He landed his X-wing beside Leia's. She was grinning.

"I can't believe that actually worked," she said, climbing out of the starfighter.

"What was that about my genius plan?" Han joined them, looking incredibly proud of himself. "I didn't quite hear you."

Leia ignored him. "Let's just worry about the hostages," she said, "so we can all go back to normal."

"I'll get Artoo," Luke suggested. "I bet he'll be able to figure out how to turn off the electricity and release them."

He flipped opened his comlink to summon the droid.

"I don't need some tin can to tell me how to flip a switch," Han said, heading for the prisoners' pens. "I'll just—ahh!"

The earth exploded beneath his feet. He flew backward, landing with a hard thud. Luke and Leia ran toward him, as the

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explosions continued. The ground beneath the prisoners' pens lurched and buckled, as if wracked by a series of massive earthquakes. *Or underground mines*, Luke realized with horror. Chaos erupted, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. Hostages screamed as they were thrown through the air by explosion after explosion. The electrified field failed, and prisoners fled across the red dust, terrified and bloody. Surrounded by wounded, desperate survivors, Luke lost sight of his friends. All he could see were the faces of frightened strangers, begging for his help.

One of them, a slim man with a pale, narrow face, limped toward Luke. Blood trickled from a wound in his forehead and flowed freely from a gash in his right leg. "Please," he whispered. "Help us."

"I will," Luke promised, hoping he could follow through.

The man threw his arms around Luke in gratitude.

"It's going to be okay," Luke said quietly.

"It will now," the man said. "Now that you're here. *Luke*."

Alarm shot through Luke. He reached automatically for his lightsaber. But his hand had barely closed over the hilt when a force pike suddenly materialized in the man's hand. It slashed through the air, landing hard on Luke's back. A concentrated nerve impulse shot through his body. As Luke's limbs went completely numb, his legs gave out beneath him. The man lowered him gently to the ground.

"Soresh..." Luke croaked as his throat closed up, choking off his words.

"A pleasure to meet you," Soresh said.

Luke tried to stand. He tried to reach for his lightsaber. He tried to call out, to warn his friends, to do anything. But all he could do was lie still as screams ripped the air. Darkness crept up on the corners of his vision, blotting everything out. Luke battled to stay conscious, but the force pike had overwhelmed his nervous system. The last thing he saw was Soresh's ghoulish smile.

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And then the darkness won.

## Chapter Five

**L**uke opened his eyes. He found himself lying in a dark cell. Stun cuffs wrapped around each wrist were attached to the wall by thick chains. He was trapped.

Every muscle in his body screamed in pain, and when he tried to rise on his knees, his legs wobbled beneath him. The blow from the force pike had left him too weak to stand, nearly too weak to move. He knew the effects would wear off...but then what? Once he got his strength back, he was still chained to a wall. And even if he could escape his bonds, thick durasteel bars stood between him and freedom.

Luke reached for his lightsaber—its blade could slice through durasteel like it was bantha butter. But the lightsaber was gone.

He sagged back to the ground, hope fading away. A true Jedi never let his lightsaber out of his sight. But Luke had never felt less like a Jedi in his life. He had failed. Failed at rescuing the prisoners, failed at warning his friends, failed at saving himself. He should never have tried to trick Soresh. Who knew how many hostages had died because of his pride?

“Well, well, well,” a familiar voice said. “So this is the famous Luke Skywalker, the man who destroyed the Death Star, who

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bested my best assassin. I have to admit, I thought you'd be taller."

Luke used all the strength he had to drag himself off the ground and meet Soresh eye to eye. The chains were just long enough to allow him to stand. But they kept him pinned to the wall, preventing him from crossing the cell and wrapping his hands around Soresh's throat.

"Where am I?" Luke said, trying not to sound afraid. "Where are my friends?"

Soresh clucked his tongue. "I suspect you'd rather not know their fate."

"What did you do to them?" Luke shouted. A wave of anguish swept over him. He had to escape. If Leia and Han were in trouble, he had to do something. If anything happened to them, just because they'd insisted on sticking by his side...

"I'm the one you want," Luke said. "You made that clear. Let them go, and do whatever you want to me."

"I can do whatever I want to you anyway," Soresh said coolly. "So I see no reason to bargain. And, as I say, your friends' fate is already sealed. As is yours."

Luke struggled against the cuffs, lunging toward Soresh, but the chains held fast.

"Just be patient," Soresh advised. "We'll begin soon, and then all will become clear to you." He turned his back on Luke, and began walking away into murky darkness.

"Begin what?" Luke shouted.

No answer came. He would have to do this on his own. Somehow.

*Concentrate*, Luke thought. He had done this before, and he *knew* he could do it again. But summoning the Force meant clearing his mind, turning within, *focusing*, and that was nearly impossible. He was too desperate, too worried about Leia, Han, Chewbacca, and all the prisoners. He knew that he had to stop trying so

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hard—that accessing the Force meant letting go. But the harder he tried to stop trying, the more useless it was.

*Forget everything else*, he thought, trying to pretend that Ben was there beside him, urging him on. *Just focus on the stun cuffs*.

He gazed intently at the cuffs, taking in their shimmering black surface and the smooth curve of the durasteel. He closed his eyes for a moment, concentrating on the cool pressure around his wrists. He imagined he could see inside the cuffs, to the molecules strung together, chaining him in his prison. The Force flowed through those cuffs, as it flowed through everything. And if he could connect with the Force, maybe he could encourage those molecules to expand. Just a little, just enough to slip his arms free. *Help me out*, he begged the stun cuffs, feeling slightly ridiculous. *Let me go*.

Luke didn't know how long he sat motionless, concentrating on the cuffs, trying to break their bonds. It felt like hours; it could have been minutes. And then it happened. Like a switch had flipped, deep within him, he knew: If he tried to pull his hands out of the cuffs, they would give.

"Please," he whispered. Then wrapped his right hand around the cuff on his left wrist, and pulled.

The cuff slipped down his wrist, over his hand, and got caught on his knuckles. He tugged harder, wincing as his bones crunched together. His hand was slippery with sweat, but he refused to give up. *Just a little wider*, he thought, trying to feel the Force flowing through the cuff, through his wrist, helping him to freedom. He gave one final, mighty tug—and the cuff slipped off. The other slid over his right hand effortlessly. He was free!

Free, that is, if you ignored the thick durasteel bars trapping him in the cell.

Luke sighed with relief, rubbing his sore wrists. His hope was returning. If he could use the Force to expand the stun cuffs, then couldn't he do the same thing to the durasteel bars? If he could widen them by only a few inches, he could slip right through.

He wrapped his hands around the bars—and screamed.

An electric shock sizzled through his body. He flew backward, slamming hard into the floor. His head clanged against the durasteel. He nearly blacked out with the impact. Waves of pain crashed over him, but Luke struggled to stay afloat—and awake. His mind was muddy, confused, and everything was blurry. He blinked hard, trying to clear his vision. Trying to *think*.

*The bars must have been electrified*, he thought.

That explained what he was doing on the floor.

But it didn't explain why he couldn't get up. It wasn't like the impact of the force pike. His limbs weren't paralyzed. They were just extremely heavy, like a giant weight pinned him to the ground. It took all the effort he could muster just to keep breathing. And he wasn't sure how long he'd be able to manage that.

Luke had never felt so frustrated. What good was the Force at a time like this? Jedi were supposed to be all-powerful—but it was becoming more and more obvious to him that he was no Jedi. Perhaps Obi-Wan Kenobi would know what to do. But Ben was dead. All the Jedi were dead. Which meant it didn't matter how much power Luke had—without anyone to show him how to use it, he was weak. And completely powerless.

Footsteps approached the cell, and he heard the sound of slow applause. It took all the strength he had just to turn his head. Soresh grinned down at him.

"Not bad," Soresh said. "Just not good enough. But we'll fix that."

Luke opened his mouth and tried to speak, but the crushing pressure on his lungs was too much. He managed little more than a pathetic gasp.

"Surely you can understand that before we got started, I had to see how much control you had over the Force," Soresh said, as if Luke had spoken. "Oh, you're surprised I know about your little Jedi secret? You have no secrets from me. You'll learn that soon enough."

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Luke gasped again. His chest barely rose with each shallow breath. The lack of oxygen was making him dizzy.

"Oh, let me help you," Soresh said. He reached toward the wall, fiddling with something Luke couldn't see. Abruptly, the pressure released. Luke drew in a deep, grateful breath. "Perhaps I should have warned you," Soresh added. "There's an electromagnet beneath the floor, and you've been injected with a ferromagnetic solution. All I need to do is activate the magnet and...well, you see what happens. So now you understand there's no need to waste your energy trying to escape."

"What am I doing here?" Luke asked, when his lungs had recovered enough for speech. "What do you want?"

"You took away one of my most valuable possessions," Soresh said. "I believe you knew him as Tobin Elad."

"X-7," Luke said. "Your assassin."

"My former assassin," Soresh said. "He's not much use to me as a corpse."

"I didn't kill him," Luke said.

"Maybe you didn't strike the final blow, but he's dead because of you. And now you're going to pay for your crime." Soresh stepped away from the cell for a moment and returned with a narrow tray of food. He slipped it through the bars. "I suggest you eat it all," he said. "You'll need your strength."

Luke's stomach turned at the sight of the nerfstek. "Why bother," he spit out, refusing to let Soresh see his fear. "If you're just going to kill me anyway, why waste your food?"

Soresh laughed. It was a hard, twisted sound, like a wounded fynock. "You've misunderstood me, Luke. I'm not going to kill you—I'm going to make you great."

"What are you talking about?" Luke asked. He had confronted many evil men over the last few months. He had learned to be brave in the face of darkness. But there was something different in Soresh's gaze, something beyond evil. They were the eyes of a man trapped in a nightmare. And now Luke was trapped there with him.



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“You killed X-7,” Soresh said, a crazed smile fixed on his skeletal face. “So now you’re going to replace him.”

## Chapter Six

Who are you?" Leia shouted, as the men tossed her into a cell. They wore identical black uniforms. Although the guards were different heights, colors, builds—different in every way—there was a strange *sameness* about them. But Leia couldn't figure out why. "Why are you doing this? Do you know who I am?"

"Do you know who *I* am?" Han said loudly, speaking over her. He shot her a pointed look, and Leia had to admit he was right. If they didn't know who she was, it was probably better they stay ignorant.

"I'm the guy who's gonna blast all those holes through you," Han answered his own question. Though, given the fact that they'd stripped him of his weapons, it was an empty threat.

Chewbacca had taken down six or seven of them before they captured him, but even the Wookiee couldn't fight forever. He was shoved into the bare cell with his two friends.

The men, whoever they were, never looked their prisoners in the eye. They never spoke, not even to one another. Leia had managed to knee one in the gut, but he hadn't grunted in pain. He had barely even flinched, and the blank expression on his face never changed. It was like they were droids. It was like they were empty.

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"Don't you dare leave us in here," Leia ordered, as they slammed and locked the cell gate.

One of the men finally did look up and, perhaps accidentally, caught Leia's eye. She shivered. There was something...*wrong* about his gaze. Something empty.

And then the man was gone.

Leia tried to shake off the horror. "This is all your fault," she muttered. When in doubt, arguing with Han always seemed like the best course of action. You could usually count on him to be wrong. But mostly, she just wanted some noise to fill up the silence in the cell. And to drown out her thoughts. There was an idea bubbling up in her, an idea she couldn't tolerate. Fighting with Han was the perfect way to ignore it.

"My fault?" Han echoed. "*My fault?*"

"Yes, your fault!" Leia said. She sat with her back against the wall of the bare cell. Han prowled the other side, searching for cracks in the wall. Chewbacca wrapped his giant paws around the durasteel bars, trying to pry them apart. But it was no use. The Wookiee roared in frustration. "See?" Leia said triumphantly. "Even Chewie thinks it's your fault."

"You going to listen to that furry oaf?"

Chewbacca growled, sounding insulted.

"Sorry, buddy," Han said quickly. "But Her Royalness here knows that if anything, this is *her* fault."

"*My* fault?" Leia repeated.

"You got it, sweetheart. If you hadn't landed so quickly—"

"If you hadn't *shot* our only leverage—"

"Oh, yeah? Well, if you hadn't...if *you* hadn't..."

"Where do you think they took Luke?" Leia asked quietly. She couldn't ignore it any longer.

"I don't know," Han said. "But you know the kid. He can take care of himself. Probably fought 'em off with some of that Jedi magic of his." He didn't sound convinced.

Leia didn't say anything.

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"Hey, don't worry," Han said awkwardly. "We're all going to be fine."

She had to smile. It was always a little entertaining whenever Han tried to be sincere. He was so... *bad* at it.

"We've gotten out of tighter jams than this one," he reminded her. "About a thousand of them."

"I know," Leia said. "You're right."

But she couldn't stop seeing the look in those men's eyes, empty and soulless. And she couldn't ignore the truth any longer. She remembered where she'd seen a look like that before: X-7, the brainwashed assassin. He'd been brainwashed by Soresh, the Imperial who had trapped them here. And Leia was starting to think that Soresh had built himself a soulless, empty-minded army.

That was bad enough, but not as terrifying as the obvious question: How many more soldiers did he need?

"I simply was not built for this kind of situation!" C-3PO exclaimed, crouching stiffly behind a large red boulder.

R2-D2 beeped sadly.

"Yes," C-3PO agreed. "You'd think I would be used to it by now."

The protocol droid and his astromech counterpart had watched their friends being dragged away to some kind of underground fortress. Now they were alone on the surface of the moon. And they had no idea what to do next.

The astromech droid was rolling in slow circles, his neural circuitry whirring with furious thought. Suddenly he released a shrill whistle.

"Oh, we have to help them, do we?" C-3PO said, sounding irritated. "That's all well and good. But how exactly do you expect us to do that?"

R2-D2 trilled a speedy response.

"Me? You want to know if *I* have an idea?" C-3PO said.

R2-D2 beeped a yes.

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"My idea is that we go back to the ship and stay out of trouble, just like we were told," C-3PO said. "I'm sure Master Luke and the others are perfectly capable of saving themselves."

The astromech droid stopped in his tracks, and unleashed an angry burst of beeps and whistles.

When he finished, C-3PO leaned stiffly against the boulder, defeated. "Yes, I know Master Luke would do the same for us," he admitted. "But how are we supposed to help?"

R2-D2 extended his manipulator arm and began drawing an outline in the red sand, beeping with excitement.

"*You* have a plan?" C-3PO cut in. "Well, why didn't you just say that in the first place?"

The astromech droid beeped.

"Since when do you care about being polite?" the protocol droid exclaimed. He threw his arms in the air. "All right, let's hear it."

R2-D2 laid out his plan. C-3PO calculated a one in 2,341,900 chance of success.

They immediately got to work.

Ferus perched awkwardly on the narrow stool, waiting for General Dodonna to finish the mission briefing. Rows and rows of pilots sat stiffly at attention. They were all eager to hear about their new mission. Under any other circumstances, Ferus would be thrilled to join their ranks. It meant Dodonna finally trusted him and Div. Or at least, trusted them enough to let them join the Rebels for this mission. The general was sending nearly half the fleet. Normally, a mission briefing would be delivered shortly before the ships set out. But this time, General Dodonna was giving his fighters two weeks to prepare and train. Even if the intel was right, and there would only be two Star Destroyers guarding the secret Imperial meeting, Dodonna was taking no chances.

"We will launch the ambush from these five strike points," General Dodonna announced, diagramming the attack on a large

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screen. He went on to explain the complicated maneuvers and split-second timing the mission demanded. The fleet was going to need practice. “And if this effort succeeds, it may be the end of our long and difficult fight,” he exclaimed. “A new day is dawning!” The room erupted into cheers.

As the crowd of Rebels dispersed, Ferus made his way to the front of the room. “General, might I have a word with you?” he asked. Though they had met before only briefly, the general had a reputation for being generous with his time. He was willing to hear anyone out—especially anyone who was a friend of Princess Leia’s.

“Walk with me,” the general suggested. He was older than Ferus, but there was something youthful about him. A certain energy and optimism that Ferus had lost long ago. However old he was, he was still young enough to hope.

They descended a turbolift together and exited the building. “I’ve grown quite fond of this moon,” General Dodonna mused, as they strolled through the forest of dense Massassi trees. “It’s a shame we’ll have to evacuate soon.” Then he smiled. “Of course, if this mission works, perhaps we won’t have to.”

“That’s actually what I wanted to speak with you about, General,” Ferus said. Then he hesitated. He had spent two decades on Alderaan, cozying up to powerful men of the court. But that had been when he was pretending to be someone else—someone with no character and nothing to say. Ferus had learned to hide in plain sight, acting as a mirror for whatever pompous stuffed shirt he was trying to impress. All so he could protect the princess—and it had worked. But it hadn’t taught him anything about how to argue his point gracefully. In fact, it had been far too long since he’d had to speak up for himself with a stranger, to be honest about what *he* believed. So he did it fast, like ripping off a patch of synthflesh. “I’m worried about this mission. Something’s not right.”

The general stopped walking. “What do you mean?”

“It’s just a gut instinct,” Ferus said. “But I fear it’s a trap.”

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"We received this intel from an extremely trusted source who would rather die than betray the Alliance," Dodonna said. "Do you have evidence we should distrust his word?"

"No..."

"And is there some reason I should let the fate of the Rebel Alliance rest on your *instinct*?"

For a split second, Ferus considered telling the general the truth. But he feared that it wouldn't do much to help his case. Even a Jedi instinct was still an instinct. It wasn't proof. "Maybe if you let me take a look at the Imperial transmission," Ferus suggested. "I was quite the slicer in my day, and I could probably..." He trailed off. General Dodonna was shaking his head.

"I like you, Ferus," the general said. "But I have no reason to trust you with classified material. The only reason you've even been allowed this much access is that Princess Leia vouched for you."

"Then perhaps we should contact the princess," Ferus said quickly.

General Dodonna tensed. It was a nearly imperceptible tightening of the muscles around his eyes and mouth. Most people would never have noticed. But Ferus wasn't most people.

"What is it?" Ferus asked urgently. "What's wrong with the princess?"

"Nothing," the general said, too quickly. "As you know, she's on a covert mission, and can't be reached."

"Her covert mission ended three days ago," Ferus said. He kept very careful track of Leia's whereabouts. "She's supposed to be on a diplomatic visit to the Winagrew system."

General Dodonna rubbed his temples. "I suppose there's no harm in telling you.... Princess Leia and her team have been out of contact since leaving Nyemari."

Ferus drew in a deep breath, forcing himself to calm down. The idea of Leia in danger caused him a nearly physical pain. And it wasn't just Leia, either. Luke was with her. The galaxy's two

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best hopes for survival...lost somewhere in the emptiness of space.

"There's no cause for alarm yet," the general said, sounding rather alarmed himself. "We're doing everything we can to locate them. And it's entirely possible the *Millennium Falcon's* communications instruments are malfunctioning. Just like everything else on the ship."

Possible...but not likely. Leia would never allow herself to be out of contact with the Rebellion for this long. Not unless she had no other choice.

"Help!" Leia screamed. Han lay on the ground, gasping and shuddering. "I don't know what's wrong with him, he needs a medcenter! Please, help us!"

Chewbacca's roars echoed against the duracrete walls. Leia knelt by Han's body, shrieking louder and louder. Finally, help arrived. Two men appeared at the gate of the cell. One had a bushy brown beard, the other was bald. Both carried blasters. "Quiet," one of them said, in a dull, empty voice.

"You have to help him," Leia said. Tears streamed down her face. "He just collapsed. I don't know what happened. Please."

The men unlocked the gate of the cell and swung it open. As soon as they did, Chewbacca lunged for their blasters. Han sprung to his feet, grabbing the nearest guard around his knees and throwing him to the ground. The guard rolled over, struggling to reach his blaster, but Han kept him pinned. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Chewbacca twisting his prey into a knot. Han slammed a fist into the guard's stomach, then delivered a blow with his forehead. The guard barely reacted to the pain. Nor did he stop fighting. The blaster lay on the ground, only a few meters away, but every time Han lunged for it, the guard's swinging fists knocked him away. It wasn't just that he was especially strong or especially fast—though he was both. It was the way nothing distracted him from his goal, from *Han*.



Han was starting to get the feeling this guy would fight to the death. And that he wouldn't particularly care whose death it was.

But Han *did* care, and maybe that finally gave him the advantage. He gave the guard a mighty heave, sending him thumping to the ground, then lunged for the blaster. His fingers grasped the butt of the weapon. Almost simultaneously, he yanked the guard off his feet and pressed the blaster to his head.

"Han!" Leia screamed.

Han looked up. Three new guards had appeared in the doorway, and one of them pinned Leia with her arms behind her back.

"Let her go!" Han shouted. He had his arm locked around the neck of the bearded guard. His other arm held a blaster to the man's head. Chewbacca held the other guard by the nape of the neck, dangling him several inches off the ground. "Let her go or we'll let your friends have it."

"You're ordered to behave," one of the newly arrived guards said. He raised a blaster.

"I mean it," Han shouted. "I'm not bluffing. I'll shoot."

A bolt of laserfire shot from the guard's blaster—and smashed straight into Han's. The weapon flew out of his hands, sizzling with the impact. Then the same guard fired another shot. It slammed into the bearded guard's chest.

Han was stunned. "You shot your own man."

"He failed," the guard said simply. He raised his blaster again, but Han put his hands in the air. After a moment, Chewbacca did, too, releasing the bald guard. The man didn't run away from the Wookiee. He didn't even move. It was as if he expected to be shot, too—and was just waiting for it.

"You may go," the guard at the door told him.

Without any visible sign of relief, the bald man walked out of the cell. The other guards shoved Leia back inside, then locked the cell again and disappeared without another word.

"Great plan," Leia said, slumping against the wall.

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"Hey, it should've worked," Han complained. "How was I supposed to know they'd be like...*that*. It's not natural."

Chewbacca growled in agreement.

"You're right," Leia said gloomily. "It's not."

They sat in silence for a long time. Han refused to give up, but he had to admit, he was out of ideas—and it seemed like everyone else was, too.

"Don't try that again." A man appeared at their cell, his low voice familiar. Unlike the guards, this man's eyes weren't blank. But they were pitiless.

"Rezi Soresh," Leia said coolly.

He bowed his head in acknowledgment.

Leia glowered at him. "Where's Luke?"

Han couldn't believe she was holding so steady. Leia could be a real pain sometimes, but he had to admit, she was good in a crisis. He'd never met anyone as tough as she was—or as frustrating. But in this case, stubbornness was the one thing that might keep them alive.

"Don't worry about Luke," Soresh said. "He'll be taken care of. As will you—and your precious Rebel fleet."

Leia jumped to her feet, fists balled. Han knew she refused to let *anyone* threaten the fleet—even if there was nothing she could do about it. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you're luckier than you know," Soresh said. His lips parted in a gruesome smile. "You won't have to see the destruction of everything and everyone you care about."

"Yeah, and why's that?" Han asked. He had a bad feeling he already knew the answer.

Soresh's smile widened, confirming his suspicions. "Because by the time it happens, you'll all be dead."

## Chapter Seven

Luke screamed.

The interrogator droid hovered before him, manipulator arms hard at work.

He had felt pain before. But that was nothing compared to this. There was no word for this.

Only screams.

There was no sleep.

Sometimes he passed out—from the pain, from the hunger, from exhaustion. But always, he was jolted back into consciousness. Blinding lights flashed at all hours; deafening noise made his head pound night and day. He had never been so tired. Too tired to think. Almost too tired to feel.

*We have to break you down before we can build you up*, Soresh said.

The commander visited the cell sometimes. Luke didn't know how often. There was no way of keeping time in the cell, no way of knowing how many hours and days had passed. It was beginning to seem as if he'd been a prisoner forever. But whenever Soresh did come, he brought gifts. Sometimes food. Sometimes a serum that would allow a few precious hours of unconsciousness. Sometimes, at his command, just a temporary

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end to the torture. But it always began again, as soon as Soresh walked away.

Luke knew the Imperial was responsible for all of this. And so Luke hated him.

But he was beginning to look forward to Soresh's visits. He was too tired to escape or think about revenge. All he hoped for anymore was a few minutes of peace.

And soon, each day, all day, he hoped for Soresh.

Luke huddled against the wall of the cell, shivering. The temperature had been lowered to only a few degrees above freezing. His breath misted in the frosty air.

"Hello, Luke," Soresh said, his face appearing like magic beyond the bars. "Having a good day?"

Luke didn't answer. He had learned to conserve his strength.

"I brought you something to eat," Soresh said. He slipped a muja fruit through the bars.

Luke pounced on it like a starved profrogg.

"You're doing very well," Soresh said. "It might soon be time for Phase Two. Would you like that?"

Again, Luke didn't answer. He gnawed on the fruit. It was soft and overripe, with a sour undertaste. Even so, it was still the best muja fruit he'd ever eaten.

"I take no joy in your pain," Soresh said. "I'd be happy to let you out of here at any time. All you have to do is swear your allegiance to me. Then all the pain will end."

Luke wanted to make that happen.

*Remember Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru,* he thought weakly. *Remember Ben.*

They had given their lives for him. So he could *fight* the Empire, not join it.

But he had no fight left in him.

"You're all alone here, Luke," Soresh said. "Your friends have abandoned you. There's no one left to save you...except for me. Join me and save yourself."

*Your friends.*

Luke drew in a deep, painful breath. *Remember Han*, he told himself.

*Remember Leia.*

"Never," he whispered. His voice was hoarse from screaming. He repeated it, louder, more sure. "Never."

Soresh shrugged. "So be it." He turned his back on the cell and began walking away.

Luke panicked—what if he never came back? What if this was the end of the little visits and treats that kept him alive? What if Soresh just left him to die?

But Soresh stopped, and turned back. "Oh, if you're worried about what your friends will think of you if you give in to me, don't. They're long gone."

"They would never leave me," Luke croaked.

"Perhaps you're right," Soresh agreed. "They say the dead stay with us forever." He peered around the empty cell as if hunting for ghosts. "Who knows, maybe they're here with us right now."

*No.* Luke refused to believe it. "You're lying."

"I had no use for them," Soresh said coldly. "*You're* the special one. *You're* the one I want. They were just nuisances. And so I disposed of them. Don't worry—someday, you'll thank me."

Soresh strode through the underground tunnels, eager to return to his office. While some equipment and personnel were housed on the surface of the moon, the bulk of his operation lay in the tunnels. He had discovered them in his early explorations of the moon, grateful to the civilization that carved them millennia before.

Luke's treatment was progressing even faster than Soresh had hoped. He was convinced that telling Luke his friends were dead would push the Rebel over the edge. Soresh had honed this process over two decades. He knew exactly how to tear apart a man's brain and rebuild it to his liking. First you broke them down. Fear, sleeplessness, pain, starvation—they were all crucial

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ingredients, doled out in precise amounts. You stripped away everything the prisoner had, made them understand that they were completely alone, with no one left to save them.

No one but their master, Rezi Soresh.

Once they understood this, they were ready for the next phase.

Years ago, the process had been more complicated. Soresh had created men like X-7, who were completely obedient to Soresh but could still think for themselves. Clearly, that was a mistake. Even a little bit of independence could lead to disaster. So now Soresh had refined the process. Not that he'd had much choice—time was short, resources were few. So he'd found some shortcuts. The soldiers he'd created didn't have X-7's strategic capabilities, and they wouldn't be much use on independent missions. But when it came to carrying out simple tasks and doing exactly what Soresh ordered them to do, they were perfect.

Of course there had been a few missteps along the way. A few mistakes he'd had to dispose of. But now he knew exactly what he was doing. The men guarding the base were completely under his control. The Rebel spy he'd brainwashed had passed along the fake Imperial transmission to his Rebel leaders, just as Soresh commanded. And now Luke was well on his way to becoming the most powerful servant Soresh could ever have.

With a Jedi under his control, no one would be able to stop him. Not even Darth Vader.

And when he destroyed the Rebel fleet—and Darth Vader along with it—the Emperor would have no choice but to forgive him. He would take his rightful place at the Emperor's side.

It was time to put the plan into action. He activated the comm system, and opened a channel to Darth Vader's private line. Only a few people in the galaxy knew how to reach the Dark Lord directly. But Soresh had always known more than people suspected.

Darth Vader's inky black hood appeared on the screen. His heavy, rhythmic breathing seemed so close, Soresh could almost

imagine the puff of hot air against his ear. He nearly shuddered, but forced himself to remain steady. Vader couldn't hurt him now.

"You cannot evade me for long," Vader said. The deep, rumbling vibration of his voice rippled through Soresh. He remembered the rumors he had heard, that Vader could suck the life out of someone with a mere thought, even through a viewscreen. Even from halfway across the galaxy.

*Silly stories*, Soresh reminded himself. *Show no fear*.

"I don't plan to for much longer," he said. "After all, I have something you want. And if you follow my instructions to the letter, I might let you have it."

"All I want is your corpse," Vader said. "And soon, I shall have it."

The transmission cut out.

Soresh smiled. Perfect. The comm operated on an encrypted channel, but Vader would easily trace its source to the Sixela system. Which meant that he would be right in the neighborhood when Soresh was finally ready for him.

Fear and rumor were powerful weapons, and Vader used them well. But they were nothing against *real* weapons, and Soresh had one of the most powerful ones in the galaxy under his control. He suspected that even Vader didn't know about Maw Installation, the secret research base devoted to creating superweapons. Grand Moff Tarkin had established and supervised it. Its secrets had died with him. But Soresh knew, because Soresh had made it his business to know everything. Including the existence and location of Maw Installation—and which of its scientists could be easily blackmailed.

As an Imperial Commander he had been in charge of following the flow of credits, making sure all contracts were paid in full, all docs were in order. It was a job few respected. A job for a weak man, they'd thought. They didn't understand that Soresh's job was *information*. And the only thing more powerful than information was the weapon being built at Maw Installation.

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The weapon whose prototype was just on the other side of the wall. Soresh couldn't unleash the weapon on the Rebel base itself—not until he was sure it would work. But it had been so simple to lure the Rebel fleet to *him*. Now the weapon sat in its launch bay, waiting for its moment. It was an instrument of total destruction.

*Just like me, Soresh thought. Come find me, Vader. Come and meet your destiny.*

*And your doom.*

It was not possible. Not possible that Han was dead. That Chewbacca was dead. Leia was dead. That Luke would never see any of them again.

It was not possible.

But he believed it was true.

Soresh had taught him that anything was possible here. Anything except escape—anything except hope.

*I'm a Jedi, Luke told himself. I have the power of the Force.*

But what good was that? Even if he knew how to use his powers, he didn't know what he would do with them. Ben had shown him how to levitate small objects, how to deflect laserblasts with his eyes closed. But surely even Ben didn't have the power to escape from a place like this. Even Ben couldn't save his friends, if his friends were already dead.

*Ben would tell me to be strong, Luke thought.*

"Stay strong," he whispered, as if hearing the words out loud would make them easier to follow. But his voice was weak, and it only reminded him that he, too, was weak. If only Obi-Wan were here to tell him. To *guide* him, to show him how to save himself. If only he could imagine Ben's voice assuring him that he would survive this, then maybe he would believe it.

Luke closed his eyes, trying to summon the memory of his old friend. Ben had spoken to him before in times of crisis, assuring him of his strength. Reminding him of his destiny.

But it was no use.



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His mind was too clouded by grief, by fear, by exhaustion. There was too much noise in the cell and in his head. Ben was gone, like Han and Leia were gone, like everyone was gone. The only voice that could help him was his own.

“You need me.”

Ferus smiled at the familiar voice. “How did you know?” He had been lying in his bunk, eyes closed, trying to sort through his dilemma. Now he sat up to face the flickering, translucent spirit of a fallen Jedi.

“When your heart and mind are open to the Force, they are open to me,” Obi-Wan said.

Ferus still didn’t understand how the Jedi Master was able to speak to him from beyond the grave. But he was grateful. Knowing Obi-Wan was out there, watching, made every challenge easier to bear.

“Luke is in trouble,” Obi-Wan said. “And I fear for his sister, too.”

Ferus stifled his irritation with the old man. Obi-Wan would never have admitted it, but for him, Leia always came second. An afterthought.

“I know,” Ferus said. “They’ve been missing for nearly a week. I’ve begun to fear the worst.”

“You can help them,” Obi-Wan said. “You know the way.”

“I know the way?” Ferus repeated. This wasn’t exactly the help he’d been hoping for. “You’re the mysterious spirit who knows all—don’t *you* know the way? Tell me how to help them. Tell me *where* to find them!”

Obi-Wan shook his head. “There is a disturbance in the Force surrounding Luke. His connection to it is growing weaker. I cannot help him. Only you can.”

“I have no idea where they are,” Ferus said. “If I knew, don’t you think I’d be halfway there by now?”

“But you have your suspicions,” Obi-Wan said. It wasn’t a question.

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Ferus hesitated. He had drawn the connections in his mind, but hadn't yet said them out loud. It was as General Dodonna said—he had no evidence, only his instincts. And his instincts had been wrong before, with dire consequences. “I fear the Rebels are walking into a trap,” he said slowly. “And that Luke and Leia’s disappearance has something to do with it. This deserted moon where the Rebels hope to ambush the Imperials...”

“You believe that to be where you’ll find Luke and Leia,” Obi-Wan finished for him.

Ferus nodded.

“And yet you sit here, doing nothing.”

Obi-Wan had always known how to make him feel better—and how to make him feel the opposite.

“The things I’ve done in the past...” Ferus broke off. It pained him too much to think about the choices he’d made—choices that had led to the death of his best friend, Roan Lands. To the death of so many others. He had trusted his instincts; he had trusted the wrong people. They had paid the price for his mistakes.

“Sometimes not choosing is itself a choice,” Obi-Wan added. “By not acting, you act.”

“Tell me what to do,” Ferus pleaded. He felt like a Padawan again, scrambling for crumbs at his Master’s feet. And part of him wished for those old days, when the way ahead had seemed so certain. When every question had an answer.

Obi-Wan favored him with a familiar wry smile. “You know I can’t do that. I can only tell you to believe—”

“—in the Force,” Ferus cut in, irritated. “I know.”

Obi-Wan’s smile widened. “Actually, I was going to suggest you believe in yourself. But then, I suppose in the end, it’s all the same thing.”

## Chapter Eight

Luke sat perfectly still as Soresh strapped him into the chair. The durasteel was cold against his skin. Sharp-edged restraints wrapped around his ankles, his wrists, his waist, his neck, and his forehead, holding him in place. Slowly and carefully, Soresh attached a series of sensors to Luke's forehead. "Nothing to fear," he said. "This won't hurt at all."

Luke was far past fearing pain.

Soresh raised an injector. "This is just something to ease the process along and make everything go more smoothly. You want that, don't you?"

Luke stared blankly ahead. Soresh smiled as if he had responded. "Good." He injected the serum into Luke's neck.

There was a faint pinprick of pain, and then nothing. A numbness spread through his body.

"The serum and the machinery work together," Soresh said, sounding proud. "I designed them myself. They act on the memory centers of your brain. Think of it as a million thermo missiles launched into your bloodstream. Except instead of heat, they're seeking memories. Seek and destroy, that's their mission. Every painful moment of your past, every person who's ever betrayed you, ever abandoned you, all gone. Everything that's

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made you who you are. One by one, we're going to purge you of such unpleasant attachments. We're going to wash the slate clean and leave you pure and fresh. As empty and trouble-free as the day you were born. Won't that be nice?"

Luke was having trouble keeping track of the words. They skidded past him, just out of reach, turning to nonsense syllables. He knew Soresh was saying something important, something that should terrify him. But the voice seemed so distant. Everything seemed distant. Luke felt like he was floating away.

He was on Tatooine, drawing spaceships in the sand, dreaming of the stars.

He was waking up on a barren cliffside, looking into the face of a crazy hermit he barely knew. Learning the secret truth of his past. "I was once a Jedi Knight," the old man said. "The same as your father."

He was surrounded by strange sights and sounds in a Mos Eisley cantina, trying not to get himself killed. Trying to buy passage to the Alderaan system from a smooth-talking spacer who called himself Han Solo.

He was on the bridge of the *Millennium Falcon*, searching for a planet that was no longer there.

He was bursting into an Imperial prison cell. A woman—a princess—lay asleep on a bare metal slab. She wore a long, white gown and was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

He was watching a red lightsaber slice through Ben's empty cloak.

He was at the controls of his X-wing, stars twinkling in his viewscreen, the Death Star looming. He was one with the ship,

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one with the Force. He was squeezing his fingers around the trigger, knowing with absolute certainty that his aim was true.

He was in the dark.

“Hold on, Luke. Please.”

It was Leia’s voice. But not Leia’s face. There were no faces in the black depths of his mind, the only place he could hide from Soresh’s memory missiles. The darkness left behind as, one by one, everything and everyone was stripped away.

*There won’t be anything left of me*, Luke thought, clinging to his memories, to himself. It was like grasping a cloud—nothing to hold on to but empty air.

“Use the Force, Luke,” Ben’s voice said, echoing in the emptiness.

*Use it for* what? Luke cried from the depths of his mind.

“Trust the Force. Trust your feelings. Trust yourself.”

And then the voices of his friends faded away, drowned out by a new voice. Soresh’s voice, deep and commanding. “You are nothing,” it said. “You belong to me. Your Master.”

The voice filled the darkness, until it consumed everything; it was Luke’s entire world.

“You are nothing,” it repeated, again and again.

“You belong to me.”

It would be so easy to stop fighting, to let go of the memories and the pain. To believe the voice—to let it replace his own.

*Hold on*, Luke told himself desperately. *For Leia. For Ben.*

*For me.*

The treatment was hard on mind and body. Some took days to recover. Some never did.

Luke lay unconscious for several hours, and Soresh stayed by his side, waiting. He had waited months for this moment. But now every additional minute was torture. He was so close to his

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goal, he could taste it. And, finally, the Rebel stirred. His eyes flickered open, and he bolted upright on the cot, alarmed.

The guards at the door raised their blasters, but Soresh stilled them with a look. He placed a hand on Luke's shoulder. "Easy," he said. "Lie down. You're safe. Your body's had quite a shock. Take your time."

Luke obeyed without question.

It was a good sign.

Soresh watched the monitors carefully, tracking Luke's heart rate, his breathing, his brain waves. Soon they'd all stabilized within normal parameters. It was time to begin. "Sit up," Soresh said.

Luke sat up.

"Who are you?" Soresh asked.

Luke opened his mouth—then hesitated. He looked confused. "I don't know."

"What is your purpose?" Soresh asked.

When the answer came, it was slow and halting, but it was correct. "To serve you."

"And who am I?"

"My Master." Luke's voice was blank, his eyes dull.

"Where do you come from?" Soresh asked.

"I don't know," Luke said. "Do you know?"

"You come from nowhere," Soresh prompted him. "You are no one."

Luke nodded. "I come from nowhere. I am no one."

"What do you remember of your past? Think hard."

Luke shook his head. "Nothing."

"Very good." Soresh patted him on the shoulder again. This had gone even better than he'd expected. Perhaps there was something about the Jedi that made their minds particularly weak. Or perhaps this one was just eager to give up. "Lie down again, relax, sleep. Soon you'll be ready for another treatment, and we'll begin again."

## Chapter Nine

Luke's lightsaber sliced the air, a blur of motion. He whirled and spun, slashing at anything that moved. Training droids bobbed awkwardly through the training room, trying to dodge the glowing blade. But it was useless. Luke was everywhere at once. Severed mechanical limbs, joint couplings, servomotors, and broken antennas flew across the room, dislodged by the whirling lightsaber. It was as if the blade was the living thing, and Luke its servant. The blade danced with deadly grace, and one droid after another clattered to the floor. Still, Luke pushed on, hacking, slicing, killing.

Exactly as he'd been ordered to do.

"Enough!" Soresh shouted.

Abruptly, Luke froze. His arm dropped to his side, deactivating the lightsaber.

"Return your weapon to me," Soresh ordered.

Luke surrendered it without hesitation.

Soresh surveyed the broken droids strewn across the training room, and the Jedi standing in the middle, seemingly unaware of the destruction he'd wrought.

*My Jedi*, Soresh thought, pleased. He had been slightly worried that his control over Luke would interfere with the Jedi's ability

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to use the Force. But so far, there had been no such problems. After several days of testing, Luke hadn't failed to complete a single challenge. Soresh had never had a new subject this obedient—or this powerful. A ring of armed guards surrounded him at all times, ready to step in if the prisoner got out of control. But Luke never got out of control. *Control* was the only thing his empty mind had left.

"I believe you're ready for your final test," Soresh told Luke. "Would you like that?" It often entertained him to treat the subjects as if they could still form opinions of their own.

"Does it please you?" Luke asked. There was no curiosity in his voice, or any emotion at all.

"It does." It was true. Once he ensured Luke's absolute obedience and loyalty, he could move forward with the final phase of his plan.

"Then it pleases me," Luke said flatly.

"Good." Soresh turned to his guards. "We'll meet you on the surface," he ordered them. "Bring the prisoners."

"This can't be good," Leia muttered, as the guards shackled the prisoners together with heavy chains and marched them out of the cell.

"Cheer up, Princess," Han said. "Maybe they've seen the errors of their ways and they're taking us back to our ship."

But she didn't smile at the weak joke, and neither did he. Durasteel shackles seemed an odd way of saying, "Sorry for locking you in a dungeon for two weeks."

"Where do you think they're taking us, Han?" Leia asked.

He detected only the faintest quiver of fear in her voice. But it was enough to make him lie. "No idea, Princess. Your guess is as good as mine."

In fact, he had a pretty good guess. His gut was telling him that once they left this cell, they wouldn't be coming back. In fact, he was beginning to think they wouldn't be going much of



anywhere, unless it was in a box. He reached forward and squeezed Leia's hand, just once.

The surface was even more arid and empty than Han remembered. But it felt good to feel the wind on his face again—even if it would be for the last time.

Chewbacca let out a mournful roar.

"Silence!" the guard shouted.

"I know, buddy," Han said softly. "Me, too."

Two figures stood a few meters from the doorway, waiting. Leia gasped. "Luke!" she cried.

He was standing beside Soresh, arms hanging loosely at his sides. As far as Han could tell, he wasn't in chains or cuffs or any kind of restraints. And yet he just stood there, staring blankly ahead.

"Luke!" Leia screamed, as the guards marched them right past Luke and Soresh.

"Who are they?" Han heard Luke ask.

"Miscreants," Soresh said. "And it's their time to die."

He handed Luke a blaster. The guards shoved Han, Leia, and Chewbacca against the side of a small shed.

*I can take them*, Han thought. If he could just distract them for a second—

"Don't," Leia murmured, catching his eye. "Not yet. Luke has a plan. He must."

"Luke? You mean the guy standing by Soresh, holding the blaster? The one acting like he's never seen us before?"

"Luke would never hurt us," Leia said with determination. "You know that."

Luke raised the blaster and took aim.

"I know that, Princess, but..." But how could Han tell her about the look he'd seen in Luke's eyes, the look that reminded him so much of X-7? She was right, *Luke* would never hurt them. But Han wasn't so sure Luke was in there anymore.

Chewbacca growled, and glanced meaningfully at the nearest guard's blaster. He was holding it loosely, keeping his eyes on

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Soresh—and paying a dangerously small amount of attention to the angry Wookiee standing a couple meters away.

“On three,” Han murmured under his breath, steeling himself to make a move. “One...two...”

“Now!” Soresh shouted.

Luke fired.

## Chapter Ten

The shot went wild, slamming into the wall half a meter above Han's ear. At the same moment, a deafening burst of music exploded behind them. Traditional Aridinian folk music—famous across the galaxy for its ability to make human ears bleed after just a few notes. The guards' attention flickered toward the source of the torturous noise. It was exactly the opportunity Han and Chewbacca needed, and they leapt into action. Chewbacca knocked his guard over with a single sweep of his massive paw, seizing the man's blaster in the same motion. Han and his guard collapsed to the ground, rolling through the dirt, their fists flying.

A lumbering speeder truck rolled out from behind a nearby building, heading straight toward them. A golden protocol droid was at the controls, while behind him, a small silver-and-blue astromech blasted folk music from his internal speakers. And neither the speeder nor the music showed any sign of braking. Guards and prisoners alike scattered out of its way.

"Nice job, for tin cans," Han muttered, launching himself at the two guards holding Leia in place. He wrapped an arm around each of their necks, choking the life out of them. Leia darted in to grab their weapons, tossing one to Han. He dropped the guards and snatched the blaster, ready for a fight.

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Soresh had scuttled away somewhere like a Rylothian schutta. Luke was nowhere to be seen. But there was little time to search for either: The area was crawling with guards and the air was already thick with smoke. Laserfire streaked across the camp. The speeder truck wheeled in circles. C-3PO had found himself a blaster, and was peppering laserbolts in every direction with little chance of hitting anything. Han ran for cover, blasting enemies in his wake. “Behind you, Chewie!” he shouted, as the Wookiee whirled around and took out three guards with one blow of his massive forearms. Han ducked behind a low shed, peeking around the edge to fire an occasional shot. He spotted Chewbacca and Leia slipping into a similar hiding place about fifty meters away.

Han checked his remaining ammunition, then prepared to make a run for it. Beyond the small complex there was nothing but wide-open space, dotted with gigantic boulders, rocky outcrops, and no sign of civilization. They had less than a kilometer of ground to cover, and they’d be safe. Or at least, safer.

“Here goes nothing,” Han muttered—and then froze.

The telltale pressure of a blaster muzzle jutted into the back of his head. “Don’t move,” a flat voice behind him said. Then: “On your knees!”

“Make up your mind,” Han grumbled. But he lowered himself to his knees. And then steeled himself for what came next. “Takes a real man to shoot someone in the back,” he muttered.

But as he’d expected, the guard didn’t react. Apparently brainwashing didn’t improve small talk skills.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” he snapped. If this was going to be the end, there was no point in stalling. He readied himself to strike, even if there was little chance of success. There was no way he was ending up back in one of those cells, waiting for an execution. He’d fight till his last breath before he ended up down there again.

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Before Han could act, there was an explosive burst of laserfire...but no pain.

And he was still kneeling. The blaster at his head fell away. Han turned around to find a guard lying in the dirt, dead. Luke was standing over him, blaster in hand. A thin trail of smoke drifted up from its muzzle.

"You okay?" Luke asked, grasping Han's hand and pulling him to his feet.

"Luke?" Han said, unsure whether to be alarmed or relieved. "You know who I am?"

"Of course I know who you are," Luke said, dragging Han farther out of sight behind the buildings. Leia and Chewbacca were firing constantly as they backed toward safety. The guards all covered behind buildings and boulders of their own, firing sporadically.

Han was very relieved to see Luke acting like Luke again. Almost as relieved as he was not to be dead. "So before...?"

"An act," Luke confirmed. "I have to let Soresh think he's won. It's the only way to find out what he's up to."

"I think we found out," Han said. "He's up to killing us. So how about we make a break before he tries again." The *Falcon* was docked nearby, and Han was certain they could take out the guards and get themselves off this rock. *All* of them.

But Luke shook his head.

"It's not just us," Luke said. "Some of the things I've heard—Soresh is plotting something against the Rebel fleet. I'm sure of it."

Han had suspected the same thing. "All the more reason to get out of here, kid. Fly away, save the day, be home for dinner."

"I have to stay," Luke said, with quiet intensity. "I just...I feel like this is where I need to be. That staying could be the only way to save them."

"This more of your Jedi mumbo jumbo?" Han grumbled.

"This is my gut," Luke said.

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And Han couldn't argue with that. He pressed a comlink into Luke's hands. "You call us when you need us," he said gruffly, trying not to reveal how worried he was. The kid was taking a big burden upon himself, and Han wasn't sure he could handle it. He wasn't sure anyone could. "We'll be waiting."

"Thanks," Luke said. "Now, I need one more thing."

"Anything, kid."

Luke hesitated. "You trust me?"

Han didn't like the sound of that. "About as much as I trust anyone," he allowed. Which wasn't saying much. "What do you need?"

Luke gave him a thin smile. "I need you to shoot me."

Luke lay on the ground, a gaping blaster wound in his left shoulder. He barely felt the pain. Instead, there was only joy and relief in the knowledge that his friends were alive. And not just alive—free. Knowing that made what he had to do so much easier to bear. Now that he knew they were safe, he could play Soresh's game, he could pretend to be a blank and obedient slave for as long as it took. There was hope after all—for his friends, for the Rebel fleet, and for himself.

He heard footsteps approach, and closed his eyes. Moments later, a booted toe dug into his side. "Huh?" he said weakly, pretending to be waking from unconsciousness. Soresh stood over him, eyes fiery with rage. Two guards stood behind him.

"He escaped," Luke admitted, then moaned.

"Not before giving you a little parting gift, I see," Soresh said, gesturing to the wound. "Nice friends you have there."

"Friends?" Luke asked, careful to sound confused, but not curious.

"Never mind." Soresh cleared his throat. "I'll admit this didn't work out as I'd hoped, but at least you've proved your loyalty. I'm proud of you."

"Thank you," Luke said.

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“Of course, you failed to accomplish your mission,” Soresh said sternly. “And for that, you must be punished.”

Luke forced himself not to react. *Leia and Han are safe*, he thought. *That’s what matters.*

Soresh jerked his head at the guards, who grabbed Luke and hoisted him roughly off the ground. “Take him inside and teach him not to fail me again.”

## Chapter Eleven

The Firespray craft slipped out of hyperdrive at the edge of the Sixela star system. Div steered the ship toward the sixth planet from the sun, which was circled by a small red moon. It felt good to be flying again—he'd been stuck on the ground for far too long. And when it came to flying, there was nothing like piloting a Firespray. Not that there was anything wrong with the Alliance's X-wings. But the Firespray had long been Div's favorite ship. Sleek, swift, and modified for optimal speed and firing capacities, it was a ship well suited to the galaxy's best pilots. And Div had always considered himself the best of the best.

From the copilot seat, Ferus activated the long-range sensors, and tried to secure a visual on their target.

"Doesn't look like much," Div said, as they reached the moon.

"Let's hope it's not," Ferus replied.

Div knew he was right. If their suspicions proved wrong, if there was nothing here but dim sun and bare rock, it would be for the best. But he couldn't help secretly wishing for a little action. Until recently, Div had been a mercenary pilot, the best in the galaxy. He'd hired himself out to anyone who'd come calling, hopping from one dirty job to the next. Smuggling, airlifting,



sneak attacks, he'd done it all—and he'd done it well. Life had been a nonstop stream of fiery battles and breathless escapes. Just the way Div liked it. Because the faster he moved, the less he had to think.

Running into Ferus again had been like running into a duracrete wall. It stopped him cold. For months, he'd been stuck on that humid Rebel moon, digging ditches and chopping trees and doing *nothing*. Nothing except thinking about his past, and everything he'd lost. Sometimes he wished he could just erase it all—Clive, Astri, Trever, all the dead, all the losses, all the painful memories—just start fresh. Since that was impossible, he did the next best thing. He flew fast, he hit hard, he defied death in a thousand different ways, anything to distract himself. And there were no distractions on Yavin 4. There was only Ferus, that constant reminder of the past.

So the rational part of him hoped they didn't run into any trouble on this moon.

But the other part of him—the part that was desperate for distraction, for movement, for *action*—almost hoped they did.

“Bringing us into orbit,” Div said, dropping the ship so low it nearly skimmed the atmosphere.

“Laser cannons armed,” Ferus reported. “Just in case.”

Div tried to reach out with the Force and sense whether there was danger lurking beneath them. But he felt nothing—as usual. Ferus kept assuring him that with time and practice, he might regain the abilities he'd had as a child. *The Force is always with you*, Ferus kept saying. *You just have to let it in*. But as hard as Div tried, he felt nothing. He could remember how effortless it had been when he was young, when all he had to do was open his mind and he could do *anything*. He just couldn't remember how he had done it. And the harder he tried, the more impossible it seemed.

“Do you sense anything?” he finally asked, giving up.

Ferus inclined his head, as if listening to the silence of space. Then he shook his head. “There is something, some small

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disturbance in the Force...but I don't believe we're in danger. Yet."

The Rebel Command would be furious if they knew Div and Ferus had ventured here, ahead of the mission. Reconnaissance had been deemed too dangerous, for fear of tipping off the Imperials who might already be here. General Dodonna didn't want anything interfering with the mission. But there were no other ships in sight, and no sign of an Imperial presence on the radar.

"Then I'm bringing her down a little lower," Div said. He dropped the ship into the thin atmosphere. Wispy clouds whipped past the viewscreen.

"There!" Ferus cried, pointing down at the surface.

"What?" Div asked.

"Something," Ferus said, shaking his head. "There's something there, I feel it."

At this speed, it was little more than a blur. Div saw nothing of use or interest. But Jedi saw things that others did not. And so Div slowed the ship for the next pass around the planet, aiming the sensor array at the general area Ferus had picked out. And there it was: the *Millennium Falcon*.

Div's eyes widened. He was about to take the Firespray in for a landing, when Ferus stayed his hand. "Not yet," he said. "Look." The ship was circled by a ring of men, standing in a tight formation. There was no indication Han, Leia, or Chewbacca were among them. "We have to know more."

So they circled the moon several more times. The instruments detected signs of life, all of them concentrated in a ten-kilometer radius of squat duracrete buildings.

Ferus drummed his fingers on the control panel. "Perhaps it's time to find out—"

A low beeping from the comm cut him off.

"It's a distress signal," Ferus reported. "And it's being transmitted on a Rebel frequency."

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"It must be the *Falcon*," Div said, certain there were no other Rebels in the system. But the signal originated several kilometers away from where the Corellian freighter was docked. Div took the ship in for a landing. Then he armed his blaster. Maybe the distress call was coming from the *Falcon* crew. But there was always a chance someone else had gotten their hands on the Rebel frequencies. And Div had no intention of walking into a trap. "Ready?" he asked.

Ferus nodded. He activated his lightsaber, and opened the hatchway. They climbed down to the surface of the moon. It was an arid, craggy landscape of shallow craters and towering boulders. As they explored the area, their footsteps kicked up clouds of fine red dust. The distress signal was coming from this location, there was no doubt about it. Whatever had called them here was nearby—right on top of them.

"We mean you no harm!" Div shouted, trying to draw them out. "Unless you mean some to us," he added, under his breath. He fingered his blaster trigger, ready for anything.

"We've found them," Ferus said quietly.

Div didn't bother to ask how he could be so sure. And he wasn't surprised when, a moment later, Han, Leia, and the Wookiee appeared from behind a boulder. The golden protocol droid and his counterpart were by their side.

Han flashed a crooked smile. "Took you long enough."

"What do you mean, Luke decided to *stay*?" Ferus asked, sounding alarmed.

The six of them—plus one very uncomfortable Wookiee—were crammed inside the Firespray. Han and Leia had run through the highlights of their time on the moon. Div couldn't believe the situation was even *worse* than he'd feared.

"He thought it was the only way to figure out Soresh's plans," Leia explained. "So he's pretending to be under Soresh's control."

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"A double agent," Ferus said, under his breath. All the color had drained out of his face. "He has to escape—before it's too late."

"Hey, I tried to convince him," Han said. "The kid knows what he wants. I say we trust him."

"If Luke believes he can do it..." Leia began.

Ferus shook his head. "Believing in one's own strength can be a great asset. But it can also be the key to defeat."

"It's really too bad you never got to meet Luke's crazy Jedi friend," Han said. "You two could have talked riddles to each other all day long."

Ferus didn't seem to hear him. Div watched his old friend closely, suspecting he was lost in the past. There was a time when Ferus himself had acted as a double agent, confident that he was strong enough to face the challenge. He had drawn sharp boundaries between the man he was and the man he was pretending to be. But as time passed, the boundaries blurred. The dark side swelled within him. He had looked the same, acted the same—but those who knew him well had sensed a difference. A hard, angry edge that had never been there before. A darkness. Ferus had come close to giving in to the dark side. Closer than anyone knew, Ferus had once admitted to Div. It was Div that had saved him—Div, and everything he had once represented. Hope for the future: innocence and light. That was a long time ago, another life, when Div was known as Lune, when Ferus was a leader. It was a long-dead past, but maybe Div wasn't the only one who still bore the scars.

"Luke has great power," Ferus said. "If he succumbs, and the Empire gains control over him..."

"He won't," Leia said firmly. "They won't."

"How can you be sure?" Ferus asked.

"Because I know Luke." Leia glared at him for a long moment. It seemed like Ferus was wrestling with a re-sponse. But ultimately, he stayed silent, and looked away.

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Div cleared his throat, hoping to cut through the tension. “We have to warn the fleet,” he pointed out. “They’re flying into a trap.”

“What do you think we’ve been trying to do?” Han said. But their weak distress signal had barely made it out of the atmosphere. And accessing the *Millennium Falcon*’s communications system was out of the question. Once the prisoners had escaped, Soresh had tripled the guard on the ship.

Now they had the Firespray. Leia fired up the comm system and contacted Yavin 4. The news wasn’t good: The fleet was already on its way. There was no way of warning them while they were traveling at lightspeed.

“This is my fault,” Ferus murmured. “I delayed too long. Again.”

Div wanted to reassure him, but didn’t have the words. And really, Ferus was right. They had both delayed too long—and now the entire fleet could suffer the consequences. “So we do what we can from here,” Div said. “I figure we’re nearly a day ahead of the fleet. That gives us time to find out exactly what kind of trap Soresh is setting—”

“—and shut it down,” Han said, his fingers already itching for his blaster. Div suspected the spacer was as eager for action as he was. The two of them understood each other—in another life, they might even have been friends. But Div had long ago vowed to have no more friends. You couldn’t lose what you didn’t have. Now he only had comrades in arms, and he was glad to count Han among them.

## Chapter Twelve

*I am nothing.*

*I am no one.*

*I belong to you.*

The mantra ran through Luke's mind on a constant loop. It was the only way to keep his eyes blank, his voice flat, his face clear of anything that might give away the truth. Even now, Soresh watched him carefully for any flicker of independence or disloyalty. But Luke had gotten good at walking through the motions of slavery. He didn't know how he'd found the strength to resist Soresh's brainwashing, just as he didn't know where he'd found the strength to keep up the act for this long. But somehow, he had. Somewhere, deep in him, there was something that refused to bend. A voice that told him to hold on, no matter what. It was no voice he'd ever heard before—more than anything, it sounded like his own. Only deeper. Stronger. Sometimes Luke wondered if it was his father, helping him from beyond the grave.

"Welcome to my greatest masterpiece," Soresh said, ushering Luke into a large room lined with computers. A giant viewscreen covered one entire wall. "Today I reclaim my rightful place at the Emperor's side. All thanks to you."

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Soresh loved nothing more than boasting about his plans to the obedient guards who followed him everywhere. Ever since Luke's final "proof" of loyalty, he had been Soresh's favored audience. And yet Luke still had no idea what he was planning for the Rebel fleet—or how to stop it.

The Commander activated the comm unit. Moments later, Darth Vader himself appeared on the screen. The image was larger than life, nearly three meters high. Luke suppressed a shudder. Even through a screen, the Dark Lord was a terrifying sight. And it wasn't just terror Luke needed to suppress. It was rage. Every time Luke saw that dark mask, every time he heard that deadly even breathing, he saw the red blade of a lightsaber lashing down on Ben. And the rage overwhelmed him.

*Hold on,* urged the voice that might have belonged to his father. *You can do this.*

He could. He stood motionless and empty before the Dark Lord, letting Soresh play out his mad game. And as soon as Soresh's attention was fixed on the viewscreen, he slipped his hand into his sleeve, where he'd hidden Han's comlink. He activated it, opening a channel to his friends. Now anything he heard, they would hear, too.

"I told you I had something you wanted," Soresh said, smiling up at the screen. "Here he is."

Darth Vader said nothing. But his fury radiated in waves. Luke could almost feel the room growing warmer.

"Tell the Dark Lord how much you're looking forward to meeting him," Soresh commanded Luke.

"If it pleases my Master, I look forward to meeting you," Luke said obediently. He was surprised—playing along with Soresh wasn't hard at all. With every command, it became easier to comply.

"You will soon regret your impudence," Darth Vader said. The screen went dark.

Soresh burst into laughter.

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It was all Luke could do not to gape at him. Vader's rage had been known to drive men to panic, to madness, even to death, but never to...joy?

"You see?" Soresh cackled. "Everything according to plan. He's tracing our coordinates as we speak. If I've calculated correctly—and I *always* calculate correctly—he'll arrive just in time to greet your Rebel fleet. I'm almost tempted to delay a bit, just for the joy of watching Vader blown up by a sky full of Rebel scum." He shook his head, briskly. "But that would be indulgent. No, I can't let personal feelings interfere with carefully set timing. Vader will burn along with the rest of them, that will have to be enough for me."

"Vader will burn," Luke repeated, hoping to help the monologue along. He needed more details—*something* that would help him figure out what to do when it was finally time to act.

"That tends to be what happens when the sun goes supernova," Soresh said, nearly giggling.

He really was insane, Luke realized, if he thought he had control over the sun. Silexa was a blue giant star. It would go supernova someday, most likely—but not for several million years.

Luke waited for Soresh to continue, but the explanation never came. Instead, Soresh settled into a chair and kicked his feet up on one of the large, gray instrument panels. "Now, we wait."

They waited so long Luke began swaying on his legs, exhausted from standing for so long. But the guards still stood rigidly at attention, oblivious to their own exhaustion. Luke did his best to match them.

*I could attack him at any time*, he thought—although with all the guards standing around, he and Soresh would likely die together. Luke wasn't afraid to die. But he was afraid to die for nothing. And that's what it would be, if he attacked before he knew exactly what Soresh had planned.

"There!" Soresh shouted, leaping to his feet.



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The viewscreen was filled with stars—but as Luke watched, one of the stars grew brighter and divided into two, then five, then a hundred.

The fleet had arrived.

“Are you ready?” Soresh asked Luke.

“Ready for what?”

“Ready to fulfill your destiny, of course.” He guided Luke over to a narrow gray console, just below the viewscreen. At its center was a glowing yellow button. “The resonance torpedoes are armed and ready to go,” Soresh said. “Grand Moff Tarkin’s greatest creation. One touch of this button will send them into the sun, kicking off a fusion chain reaction, and then...” He flung his arms in the air, blowing his lips out with the sound of an explosion. “If we hurry, we’ll have time to watch the fireworks from space—before we navigate to safety, of course. I would never leave you behind, Luke,” he said, as if Luke had expressed concern. “You’re my ticket.” He pulled something out of his cloak—the hilt of a lightsaber. “You’d like this back, wouldn’t you?”

“If it pleases you,” Luke said, trying to survey the room without moving his head. There were six guards, plus Soresh. If he had his lightsaber back and could find a blaster, there was a chance he could take down Soresh before the button got pressed. As long as he chose the exact moment to act.

*Let the Force be your guide*, the deep voice in his mind reminded him.

Soresh dangled the lightsaber before him. “You can have it back, for good,” Soresh said. “All you need to do is press the button.”

Luke didn’t move.

“Now,” Soresh urged him.

*Now.*

Luke struck out. His leg slashed across Soresh’s knees, knocking the man to the floor. The lightsaber flew out of Soresh’s hand and Luke snatched it out of midair.

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“Kill him!” Soresh shouted.

The lightsaber blade lit up just as the guards started shooting. Luke slashed and hacked at the guards, but they evaded him. He was always a step behind, a moment too slow...maybe because now he understood those guards. He understood they were people just like him, doing what Soresh wanted them to do because they had no other choice. He didn't want to hurt them.

On the other hand, he didn't want to die.

Trying to remember his training, Luke swept the blade through the air, deflecting every laserbolt that came near him. Laserfire erupted in the room, scorching the walls and blasting through the giant computers. Exposed wiring sparked and soon flames licked at the walls. Foul, acrid black smoke choked the room, shrouding them in darkness. Laserfire streaked through the black, and Luke struck on instinct. Eyes squinted against the smoke, he had nothing but the Force to tell him where the next shot was coming from. Still, he wheeled on his feet, deflecting one shot after another, from all directions.

Soresh had dropped to the ground, and was slithering across the room on his belly. Luke felt the blade reaching toward him, as if the lightsaber wanted Soresh dead as much as Luke did. But the laserfire was backing him toward the far wall, and soon he was pinned. His blade was still blocking the shots, but his arms were tiring. He couldn't keep this up forever, and sooner or later his luck would run out. Even if it didn't, he would never be able to overpower Soresh. Not unless he could figure out a way to take out the guards—and there was no way he could defeat so many.

Especially since, from the sound of approaching foot-steps, more were on the way. A wave of hopelessness washed over him, but Luke ignored it. There had to be *something* he could do, some way to defeat the enemy—

And then he got it. The guards weren't his enemies, he reminded himself. Not really. They were just men and women like him, except they hadn't had the strength to hold on. They'd

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lost themselves to Soresh. *He* was the enemy, of all of them. Luke just had to make them realize it. He continued to dart and weave away from the bolts of laserfire, as his mind worked feverishly, searching for a solution.

*The Force can have a strong influence on the weak-minded,* Ben had told him.

What could be weaker than a mind that was completely empty?

It was difficult to concentrate while he was swinging his lightsaber wildly and dodging laserbolts. But maybe that was better. Concentration had never helped his control of the Force. On the contrary, it was only when he *stopped* thinking, *stopped* trying that he ever succeeded. And so, without thinking about it anymore, or knowing what he was going to say, he spoke to the guards.

“You are someone!” he said.

“You do not belong to him!”

“He is not your master!”

He said the words with as much force as he could, again and again, trying to drown out the voice that was playing in their heads. But it wasn’t working. The hail of laserfire continued to assault him in dangerous bursts. And somewhere, beneath the veil of smoke, he was sure he could hear Soresh laugh. At the sound, everything Soresh had done to him welled up in Luke and burst out of him.

“He is not our master,” he said, pouring all his rage, all his pain, all his exhaustion, everything he was and had ever been into the words. “We do not belong to him.”

Silence dropped over the room. A blaster clattered to the floor.

“Where am I?” someone mumbled.

“What am I doing?”

Sounds of confusion and fear—but no more explosions. No more laserfire. No more killing on command. It had worked—they were free.

## **Alex Wheeler**

Soresh's laughter cut through the noise. Luke whirled around. The Commander, bloody and shaken, but still on his feet, lunged toward the glowing yellow button. "Too late," Soresh said, and pressed the button.

Luke watched the viewscreen in horror as three resonance torpedoes hurtled toward the sun.

## Chapter Thirteen

**L**uke leapt for the console, desperate to stop the torpedoes. There had to be some way of calling them back, or detonating them in midair, something to stop the inevitable. But there wasn't. And he'd wasted too much time searching—enough to give Soresh a head start on his escape. Luke took off after him, then hesitated in the doorway, torn. “You have to find a way off the planet!” he shouted at the confused guards. “If we stay here, we're all going to die!”

The confused buzzing in the room just got louder.

“Ships!” Luke shouted, frustrated. “We have to find ships!”

“Ships!” One of them cried, and took off running down the hall. Luke urged the rest to follow him. He had to help everyone off the planet, and he had to find a way to warn the Rebel fleet—and he had to catch Soresh. But he was only one man, and he couldn't do everything at once—so where was he supposed to start?

“Luke!” A familiar voice cried. A moment later, Leia appeared in the corridor, flanked by Han, Chewbacca, Ferus, and Div. The two droids wheeled behind them.

Luke's jaw dropped. “What are you doing here?”

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“Rescuing you,” Leia said, then spotted the fleeing guards. “Though it looks like you got tired of waiting.”

Luke drew them back into the control room and explained everything that had happened. Chewbacca stayed in the corridor, guarding the door, while Ferus and R2-D2 took a long look at the launch controls. They both agreed: There was nothing they could do to stop the torpedoes. In less than three standard hours, the sun would explode. It would collapse into itself, generating a shock wave that would consume the entire star system. Nothing in its wake would survive.

Leia turned pale. “Half the fleet is up there!” she exclaimed. “We have to warn them.”

C-3PO raised a golden hand. “With any prototype weapon of this sort, there is a one in three hundred twenty-seven chance that the weapon will fail.”

Han snorted. “Normally, I’m all about playing the odds, but this game’s a little too rich for my blood. What do you say we find the fleet and get out of here?”

“I fear that may be more difficult than it was a moment ago,” Ferus said solemnly, his eyes fixed on the viewscreen behind their heads. The others turned around. Darth Vader’s Interdictor Star Destroyer had just winked out of hyperspace. Six other Destroyers appeared a moment later. TIE fighters were already pouring out of them, firing on the Rebel ships.

“They were only expecting *two* Destroyers,” Div said, alarmed. “And they thought there’d be time to lay an ambush. They can’t handle this.”

“And they can’t flee the system when they’re under this kind of fire,” Han added.

For a brief moment they stood in silent horror, watching the battle unfold before them. Then Leia slammed a fist down on the launcher console with a loud crack. “They need help,” she said, seizing control. “Luke, Han, Div—find ships. And the guards—”

“The guards won’t be a problem,” Luke told her.

## STAR WARS: Uprising

"Then help them fight. I'll stay here and find some kind of communications equipment so I can fill in the fleet—and maybe I can get the Imperials to understand what we're dealing with."

"I'm not leaving you here alone," Luke said.

She glared at him. "I can take care of myself. The fleet can't."

"I'll stay with her," Ferus said quickly. "We have to evacuate this moon—there are still the hostages you told us about. We can't just leave them here to die."

"We're not leaving anyone here," Han said firmly. "You do what you need to do, Princess, then you make sure you get yourself off this rock. We're not leaving this system without you."

"Get up there, now," Leia ordered him, "or none of us will be leaving this system, period."

"As you wish, Your Worshipfulness," Han said. He grabbed Luke. "C'mon, kid, it's time for some target practice."

They rushed out of the room, hesitating only when Leia called after them, a note of panic in her voice. "Han! Luke!"

They turned back. She shot them another fierce glare. "Don't you *dare* get yourselves killed."

Leia watched with surprised respect as Ferus sorted through the mess of wires, stripping and splicing and finally rising in triumph. "We should be able to transmit now," he said.

She still couldn't believe this was the same Ferus Olin she'd known all those years on Alderaan. The same slimy, spineless suck-up she'd despised for most of her life. Of course, he'd gone by a different name then—but a new name wasn't supposed to change so much about a person. She was finally seeing the man her father had always promised her was there, behind Ferus's oily smile. The man who was brave and capable, who could be counted on. She just didn't understand why it had taken him so long to emerge.

*War could make a hero out of almost anyone*, she mused.

Just look at Han.

## Alex Wheeler

“Princess?” Ferus prompted her.

Leia shook off her thoughts. It was time for action. She contacted the fleet leader on a secure line and offered her authentication code.

“Princess Leia!” Commander Willard’s voice came through the comm loud and clear. “What a relief you’re safe.”

“None of us are safe for much longer,” Leia said quickly. “In two hours, twenty-seven minutes, this system’s sun is going to explode.”

“How can you possibly know—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Leia said. “The fleet will have to make the jump into hyperspace as soon as possible.”

“Understood,” Commander Willard said. “But we can’t go anywhere under such heavy fire. We’re putting everything we have into holding off the Imperials.”

“Do what you can up there,” Leia said. “And I’ll do my best from down here.”

“May the Force be with you, Princess.”

“And you,” Leia said, cutting the transmission. She’d never thought much about those words before meeting Luke. It was just something people said, calling on a meaningless superstition, just a habit or a lucky charm. But since Luke had come into her life, she’d begun to understand that the Force was real. *If only it were with me*, she thought, not for the first time. *Imagine what I could do*. But there was no point in thinking about that. You fought with the weapons you had, not with the ones you wished for.

“Can you open a channel to the Imperial flagship?” she asked Ferus.

He nodded. “Do you think they’ll listen to you?”

Not a chance. “It’s worth a try,” she said. Then she prepared herself. It was Vader’s ship, which meant Vader himself might be on the other end of the line. The man she held responsible for the death of her home planet—and with it her father. *I will not lose control*.



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But it wasn't Vader's distinctive voice. Just a faceless Imperial. Leia spoke without fear. "This is Princess Leia Organa of the Rebel Alliance," she said.

"What do you want, Rebel scum?" the Imperial spit out. "We'll accept nothing less than unconditional surrender. Submit to us now, or die like the swine you are."

*Now is not the time to fight*, Leia reminded herself.

"This is not about our battle," she said, as calmly as possible. "This is about a common threat to us all."

"*Nothing* is a threat to the Empire," the Imperial said. "The sooner you learn that—"

Enough diplomacy. "The sun is about to explode," Leia said, her temper fraying. "Stop firing on the Rebel ships, get out of the system, and maybe you won't explode with it."

There was a sharp bark of laughter. "More pathetic Rebel tricks? When will you ever learn? The Empire is your destiny. Quit this ridiculous—"

Leia cut the line. "Either they'll analyze the solar spectrum and figure out I'm telling the truth, or they won't," she told Ferus. They needed to help the befuddled guards and the hostages find a way off the planet. Even if the Imperials kept fighting, at least some ships would be able to make it out of the system. "We can't afford to stand around and wait for them to decide to believe us."

"The fleet is strong, Princess," Ferus assured her. "And Div, Han, Luke...each of them will give everything to do defend the Rebellion. All they have."

Leia frowned, her eyes pinned on the viewscreen. It glowed with laserfire and explosions. "That's what I'm afraid of."

## Chapter Fourteen

Fire again, Chewie!” Han shouted into the comm. The Wookiee released another concussion missile. It screamed toward the nearest TIE fighter and collided with its cockpit. The Imperial ship exploded, unleashing a flakstorm. Han pulled up hard, straying right into a hail of laserfire.

“Whoa!” he shouted, as laserbolts strafed the hull. Sparks sprayed from the instrument panels and smoke plumed in the cockpit. “When I said fire, that’s not what I meant,” Han muttered, dropping into a sharp corkscrew to evade the Imperial ships.

A proton torpedo seared past, crashing into the X-wing on his starboard flank. Fractured and twisted pieces of durasteel and broken wings floated across the viewscreen. Ships were exploding on all sides of him. Laserfire blotted out the stars. All those weeks on the ground, Han had longed to be back in space again, behind the controls of his ship. But this wasn’t exactly what he’d had in mind.

There had been twelve guards surrounding the *Falcon*—not exactly a challenge for the combined might of Luke, Han, Div, a Firespray, and an angry Wookiee. Han had been all ready to blast his way through, but Luke had stopped him in his tracks. “Let

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me deal with it,” he’d said...and a moment later, the guards laid down their weapons. Han did his best not to look shocked, but Luke saw straight through it. “Jedi hokum,” he’d explained with a laugh.

But after that, there was no more time for jokes or hokum. Div launched his Firespray, and Han and Chewbacca set off in the *Falcon*. Luke jumped into the X-wing he’d arrived with. They plunged into the thick of the battle, adding their firepower to the Rebel attack.

Han took out two more TIE fighters and then spotted Luke’s X-wing zigzagging through the battlefield, three Imperials on his tail.

Han opened a comm link to the X-wing. “Luke, you’ve got company, six o’clock.”

“I see them, but I can’t shake them,” Luke reported.

“Going in.” Han reversed thrusters and swooped toward the TIE fighters chasing Luke. He pummeled them with laserfire, but they swerved out of reach. These guys were good.

Han was better. “On my mark, pull up, hard,” Han told Luke.

“Copy that,” Luke said, without question.

Han accelerated to full speed, dipping beneath the TIE fighters. “Now!” he shouted, and Luke’s X-wing twisted in midair, shifting into a sharp climb. The TIE fighters overshot, and as they tried to compensate, Han picked them off one by one.

“Got ’em!” he crowed, grinning as the cockpit lit up with the glow of fiery wreckage. “You Imperial flyboys never learn, do—”

“Han!” Luke screamed through the comm link. “Pull up! Pull up, now!”

The *Millennium Falcon* was careening straight toward a squadron of TIE fighters. Their laser cannons were blasting at full force. Han yanked hard on the controls, but the ship didn’t respond. The viewscreen showed smoke billowing from the port thrusters.

They were going to crash.

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Luke didn't stop to think. He pivoted to his port side and swooped down toward the squadron of TIE fighters, strafing them with laserfire. Div's Firespray came in hard and fast from the other direction, spiraling and weaving in sync with Luke's maneuvering, as if they had coordinated the attack. The TIE fighters fanned out to evade the Rebel blasts. Div and Luke gave chase. The *Falcon* gave them cover as they zoomed through the maze of ships, firing without stop.

"Thanks for the save, kid." Han's voice came through the comm.

"What happened?" Luke asked. For a moment, he'd been sure the *Falcon* was going to crash straight into the Imperials.

"Little trouble with the nav system," Han said casually, as if he hadn't just narrowly avoided a fiery collision. "Nothing to worry about."

Luke shook his head and had to laugh. The *Falcon* didn't look like much of anything—except a pile of junk, that is. The *Millennium Falcon* was always breaking down—if it wasn't the particle shields, it was the hyperdrive or the aft sensory array—but Han always claimed the ship had never let him down, and never would. And Han was right about one thing: If you treated her right, she could fly like no ship Luke had ever seen.

Still, it was going to take more than a few good ships to untangle this mess. Luke never felt more at home than when he was behind the controls of a ship. He was able to clear his mind and focus it, all at once, letting himself become one with the machine. He dipped and glided, slipping through the web of Imperial attackers, watching his torpedoes streak through space. They always hit their mark.

But even if he shot down every ship he saw, he was only one pilot—there were hundreds of TIE fighters, maybe thousands of them. The Rebel fleet was barely holding its own.

The comm unit pinged. "You thinking what I'm thinking?" Div asked.

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“We need to take out more ships,” Luke said, stating the obvious.

“Not to mention stop from getting taken out ourselves,” Han chimed in, as another X-wing burst into flame.

“Exactly,” Div agreed. “And I’ve got an idea.”

Luke listened as Div laid out his strategy. It was dangerous, and probably crazy.

Which meant it might actually work.

“On my mark!” Div barked into the comm. He pulled his ship into a whiplash turn. “Mark!” He looped up and around the squadron of TIE fighters, leading them on a wild chase through the battlefield. Han and Luke flanked him on either side, joined by several other Rebel ships. As planned, the Rebels didn’t fire—they channeled all their power into the thrusters, narrowly outpacing the TIE pursuers.

“Faster,” Div murmured, pushing the engines far past their breaking point. “Come on.”

The cloud was nearly in reach. The Mon Calamari cruisers had done their part perfectly. The plasma bombs they’d detonated had expelled a massive cloud of gas. It obscured a thousand meters of space behind an eerie red glow. The cloud would be harmless to ships passing through it, but was poison to navigational instruments, which meant as soon as they entered, they’d be flying blind. Perfect.

Div streaked into the cloud, letting his instincts guide the way, as they always had. He counted off the seconds aloud. “Three, two, one...Now!” he shouted into the comm. He yanked the controls, dropping the ship into a steep dive. Every Rebel ship did exactly the same. But the Imperials had no one to signal them—and no one to remind them that a Star Destroyer hovered on the other side of the cloud.

The squadron of TIE fighters slammed into the side of the ship, ripping a jagged hole in its hull. The massive ship began to list and shudder. Only a few of the TIE fighters peeled off in

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time, alerted by the explosions and shrapnel that danger lay ahead. Div wasn't about to give any of them a chance to shoot down the fleeing Rebels. As the X-wings followed orders and sped away, Div zoomed into the fray, picking off the TIE fighters one by one.

Dimly, through the comm, he heard Luke and Han urging some of the Rebel transport ships to activate hyperdrives while the Imperials struggled to regroup. The X-wings gave the larger ships cover, as they sped out of the system and winked into hyperspace. But Div's attention was laser-focused on the four ships that had survived the sneak attack, all of which were firing on him at once.

He was a good pilot.

The best.

But he couldn't evade missiles from four directions at once. One struck a glancing blow to his forward hull. Another blasted into his rear thrusters. Smoke filled the cabin. The navigational controls became sluggish...and then stopped responding altogether. Which meant whether he survived this encounter or not, he'd be of no use to the Rebel fleet. And since the hyperdrive had been blown out with the first missile, it was only a little longer before he'd be of no use to anyone.

But the laser cannons were still operational, and as the TIE fighters moved in for the kill, Div let them approach. "Just a little closer," he whispered. If this was going to be his last fight, he intended to win it.

They thought he was helpless, and were careless as they approached. Which gave Div one chance. He lined up the shot, then closed his eyes, waiting.

This time, he didn't have to try to connect to the Force. It was there for him, as Ferus had always promised him it would be. *Now*. He felt it, with a deep certainty. He pulled the trigger, and opened his eyes. A missile screamed into the nearest TIE fighter. The ship exploded, neatly splitting down the middle. Its solar energy collectors blew off in opposite directions, crashing into

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the two TIE fighters that flanked it. The fourth got caught in the blowback, and blew up a moment later.

Just not before it released one final torpedo.

Div had miscalculated—only slightly, but enough.

As the torpedo rocketed toward him, time seemed to slow. Unfortunately, it only gave him a chance to watch the end creeping closer.

He had chosen this sacrifice. It was probably a futile one, since all he'd done was buy the Rebels a bit more time.

But sometimes more time was all you needed.

The torpedo slammed into his ship and blew off his stabilizer fin. The ship spiraled out of control, spinning wildly in a cyclone of debris.

"Div!" Luke shouted through the comm.

"Make this count, Luke," Div said, but he suspected his communications system had failed, like the rest of them. Alarms were blaring through the ship as he plunged toward the moon's atmosphere.

There was nothing to do now but wait.

"Div!" Luke shouted again, but there was still no answer. The Firespray was bleeding exhaust and fuel as it dropped toward the moon. Within moments, it had slipped into the atmosphere. It sliced through the clouds, a red-hot ember growing dimmer and dimmer. And then it was gone. "We have to go after him," Luke cried.

"He's gone, kid," Han said. "But he bought us some time. Be grateful for that."

Luke knew he was right. The Rebels needed them up here, not down there, scouring the surface for wreckage.

And surely that's all there would be, wreckage. Even if Div had managed to eject before his ship burned up in the atmosphere, he could be stranded anywhere on the moon. That was millions of kilometers of ground to search—there was no

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way they could do that before the supernova. One way or another, Div was gone.

The fighting continued without him, but Han was right: Div had bought them some time. A good chunk of the fleet had managed to escape. Of course, that meant the ones that remained were more outnumbered than ever. Div wouldn't be the last to fall.

But Luke couldn't think about what might happen. He couldn't think about how narrow their chances were. He could only think about surviving each moment, and the next. The next TIE fighter, the next missile, the next laserbolt, the next explosion. The moments blurred and the battle seemed to stretch on forever, until Luke felt he'd been in this cockpit his entire life. He fired and fired again, and yet there were always new ships emerging from the wreckage. The Imperials would never give up.

And then the sky lit up with a bright, blinding flare.

First he thought another squadron had been taken out, but this was brighter than a simple explosion, brighter than anything he'd ever seen. It seared his vision, and for a few seconds, he saw nothing but a glowing black.

He blinked hard, and gradually, the world came back. But it was a changed world: There was a roiling storm of fire where the dim sun had been. The resonance torpedoes had ignited their chain reaction—the sun began its collapse. The shock wave traveled at a small fraction of the speed of light, which meant they had a little time before it hit. About forty minutes, the droids had calculated—after that, the explosion would consume them all.

"This is Gold Leader," the voice came over the comm link. "The Imperials are fleeing. Repeat, the Imperials are fleeing. All ships return to base."

It was true. The firing had stopped, as understanding spread through both fleets. Star Destroyers and Rebel freighters alike were winking into hyperspace, desperate to flee the dying sun.



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But Leia was still below, helping evacuate the moon. Which meant Luke wasn't going anywhere but down.

## Chapter Fifteen

You'll be fine," Ferus assured the stooped old woman, a streak of dried blood smeared across her face.

"Just activate the hyperdrive as soon as you're clear of the gravitational field," Leia instructed the pilot, as he climbed aboard the ship that Soresh had taken hostage one month before.

"Be brave for your mother," Ferus said, resting his hand on a young boy's scruffy brown hair. "She needs you."

One by one, the shaken settlers climbed aboard their ship. They had been trapped on the moon for weeks, locked inside dank cells with fading hope of escape. It seemed no one could believe that they were actually being given a ship, and a means to escape. But, weeping or smiling, they all climbed on board.

"That should be the last of them," Leia said.

Among the guards, confusion had proved contagious. Without Soresh around to give them orders, they were easily swayed. With the help of the guards Luke had freed, Leia and Ferus had herded them all onto ships of their own. The moon was evacuated and sun would explode in thirty-eight minutes—which meant it was time for them to go.

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After making one final sweep of the main base installation, Ferus and Leia retreated to the hangar, where the final ship of hostages was waiting for them.

It was the first time they'd really been alone together since Ferus had arrived on the moon. "I was very relieved to discover you were safe, Princess," Ferus told her. Leia would never know *how* relieved, just as she would never know that he had sworn his life to protect her. There was so much he hadn't told her—and so many lies that he had.

"I wasn't the one in real danger," Leia said, as they rushed toward the ship. "Luke was the one who risked everything. Sometimes I wonder..." She drifted off.

"Leia?" Ferus prompted her. It wasn't like the princess not to say exactly what was on her mind.

"I wonder what I would have done in his place," she admitted. "Whether I would have been strong enough to hold out against Soresh."

"Of course you would have!" Ferus assured her. "Princess, you're the strongest person I know."

But Leia shook her head. "But it isn't just strength, is it? Luke has something else...a certainty, a belief in his destiny. Even when everything else is stripped away, he still has..."

"The Force?" Ferus guessed.

Leia reddened, and a small laugh bubbled out of her. "I don't even know why I'm telling you this," she said. "It's ridiculous, I know. There's nothing Luke can do with his lightsaber that I can't do with my blaster. It's just sometimes I wonder how much more I could do for the Rebels, if I had his gifts. I wonder if I could have saved—" She stopped, abruptly.

But Ferus knew what she was thinking. "What happened to Alderaan is not your fault, Princess. You couldn't have stopped it."

"You're right," Leia said, looking away. "*I* couldn't."

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Ferus was quiet for a moment. He listened to the sound of their pounding footsteps. Then he made a decision. “Leia, stop,” he said, and grabbed her arm.

“We’ve got less than half an hour,” Leia said. “That doesn’t leave much time for sightseeing.”

“Just a second,” Ferus said. “Indulge an old man.”

She stopped running, and gave him an impatient stare. “Well, what is it?”

She took his breath away, this fierce, brave woman she had become. When he looked at her, he still saw the inquisitive toddler, the willful child, the rebellious teenager—he saw her entire life, and understood it had all led up to this moment. She was ready.

Ready to know the truth—ready to know her destiny.

No longer would he allow her to live in ignorance. No longer would he let her feel powerless or *less than*. No longer could he stand hearing her question her own strength. No longer would he listen as she doubted herself.

Obi-Wan had tried so hard to convince him it was better this way. That Luke would be their warrior and Leia their spare, their backup, in case anything went wrong. Obi-Wan believed that Luke would be the galaxy’s savior, that the risk of hiding the truth would pay off. But Obi-Wan also believed that Ferus should trust his instincts.

And his instincts were telling him that Luke and Leia would be stronger together. That the Force lived within her, and she deserved the chance to know it, to know herself—and to know her brother.

“There’s something I haven’t told you,” he said, aware that after this moment, nothing would be the same. “Something you need to know.”

“What is it?” she asked impatiently. “We have to leave.”

“Leia, I—” Suddenly, he couldn’t catch his breath. His lungs squeezed together as if trapped in a vise. A curtain of darkness

descended across his vision. It was as if the air had turned to poison, killing him with every breath.

And, as he reached out with the Force, he heard it, the breathing, heavy and even, wheezing death with every exhalation.

Vader was here.

And he was close.

"I heard something," he said quickly. "Back in the base. Belowground." They were at the mouth of the hangar. "It sounded like a cry for help. I think there might be more prisoners."

"I don't hear anything," Leia said. "And time's running out. Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," Ferus said urgently. He had to get her out of here before Vader got close enough to sense her presence. They'd met face-to-face before, and Ferus couldn't believe that Vader hadn't figured out the truth. There was no way he was going to risk giving Vader another chance again. Because even if he didn't realize who Leia was, he would surely take her prisoner—or kill her.

"Then we have to go back and help them," Leia said.

"I'll go," Ferus said. He would do whatever it took to stall Vader and give Leia time to escape. It was the only way to make sure she survived.

"I'm not letting you go on your own!" Leia said, indignant.

There was little time to argue. "Leia, please," Ferus said. "I promised your father I would protect you. Don't make me break that promise. If there's anyone back there, I'll help them. I'll be fine. Please—just go."

He could tell it was the last thing she wanted to do. But maybe she saw his desperation.

"All right," she finally said. "But if your ship doesn't take off in ten minutes, I'm coming back for you."

Ferus grasped her hands and gave them a tight squeeze—it was as much of a good-bye as he could allow himself. If she

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knew what he was about to do—and how it would most likely end—she would never let him go.

Leia boarded the freighter and Ferus ran into the base, back the way they'd come. Back toward Vader. He didn't have far to run. As he rounded one corner, and then another, the stench of evil grew overwhelming, the air thick with darkness. And then, just beyond the second corner, there he was. Darth Vader, standing still in the middle of the hall, as if he were waiting. As if he knew exactly what was coming, and who.

Ferus froze at the opposite end of the corridor. He couldn't force his legs to carry him any closer.

"I had hoped you were dead," Darth Vader said in a low rumble.

"Sorry to disappoint you." Rage swelled within Ferus. He hadn't come face-to-face with Vader since that day, so many years ago, when the Sith had left him for dead. When Ferus had failed to avenge Roan's death, and left Vader alive, to kill so many more. Because Ferus failed, Vader lived to strike down Obi-Wan. To destroy nearly everything and everyone he touched. Standing before him, Ferus understood the true nature of hate.

He had told himself that he only wanted to stall Vader, to protect Leia. But that wasn't the whole truth.

He wanted another chance at killing the Dark Lord. He wanted to stand over Vader's body and watch him die.

"I could kill you where you stand," Vader said. "I could kill you with a thought."

"It would probably be easier," Ferus replied lightly. He knew he had to leave behind his hatred if he was going to survive this encounter. He couldn't beat Vader by matching him darkness for darkness. His rage would only cloud his connection to the Force; he needed to stay clear. "And you always were one to take the easy way out. *Anakin*."

"Anakin is dead," Vader said.

"So you've told me before," Ferus said. "You killed him. Just like you killed Obi-Wan. And Padmé." He watched carefully,

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hoping for some flinch, some sign, *something* to indicate that the name had some impact. If Anakin really was dead and gone, then Ferus had no chance left at all. Perhaps none of them did. “Erase all reminders of who you used to be, isn’t that the plan? Any reminders of what you’ve done and how much it hurts?”

“You know nothing about pain,” Vader said. Then he raised his lightsaber. The red beam glowed in the darkness. “But it will be my pleasure to teach you.”

## Chapter Sixteen

**D**arth Vader had come for Luke Skywalker. He had come to find the boy who had caused so much trouble, wrought so much destruction—and somehow, inexplicably, bore Anakin's name.

But he had stayed—even when it became clear that Luke was gone, along with everyone else—because he sensed there was someone else hiding in the bowels of the station. Someone *familiar*. A presence that evoked strange and unsettling images of the past, of things he hadn't thought about for many years. Images of *Padmé*—her scent, the soft melody of her voice, the myriad details he'd spent two decades trying to forget. It meant there was someone on this station connected to his past, and that someone needed to die.

As he swept through the halls, he had been almost ...not afraid, certainly. Fear was beneath him now, useful only as a weapon with which to destroy his enemies. No, he had been *watchful*, wondering who he might find lurking around the next corner.

Discovering Ferus had been a relief. This was no unknown variable from the past. Ferus was known, easily dealt with. A loose end he should have tied up long before. Ferus had no power over him; his words were empty. He was nothing but a



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feeble old man babbling about a dead past. And yet the sight of him—the sound of the name *Padmé* on his lips—was enraging. Ferus should be dead, as all the Jedi should be dead. It was infuriating that he was still crawling around like a Bossuk roach.

No longer. Vader stoked the rage, let it swell within him. His rage was his power—something the pathetic Jedi had never understood. His rage was bottomless; his power was limitless.

Ferus was nothing in the face of that. Less than nothing. A roach, to be squashed underfoot.

Vader crossed the distance between them before the old man even had time to draw his weapon. *I could kill him with a single blow*, Vader thought. But there was no hurry. And he had to admit, he was curious. Ferus had become such a decrepit human specimen, paunchy and sad. *Soft*. It would be interesting to let him believe he could still put up a fight.

Vader swung his blade down. Ferus met it solidly. There was a dull hum as the red and blue blades clashed.

“Your technique has become lazy,” Vader observed. He parried a blow, almost as an afterthought.

Ferus didn’t reply. He was breathing heavily, gasping with each lunge and thrust. Vader deflected every strike with little more than a flick of the wrist.

“And you’ve gotten complacent,” Ferus said, slashing diagonally. Vader retreated a step, and the lightsaber hummed through empty air. “You think no one can match you, right? Same old Anakin.”

“Anakin is *dead*!” Vader roared, and struck with his full power. Time to end this game.

But Ferus somehow evaded the blow—and then danced away from the next one, and the next. The blue blade whirled and spiraled through the air, matching Vader strike for strike, blow for blow.

It was that *name*. That was the only explanation. Even the sound of it had somehow thrown him off balance.

This was unacceptable.

## Alex Wheeler

“You move well for a fat old man,” Vader granted. He was more powerful by far, but the plastoid armor made for awkward maneuvering. And he would never reclaim the physical grace he’d had as Anakin.

Vader shook off the thought, disgusted with himself. Anakin had nothing that he wanted, *nothing*. He let the disgust grow. *This* was what he needed. Not grace, not that foul Jedi concentration. Anger.

Darkness. Control.

Ferus leapt through the air, driving the lightsaber down in a chopping motion as he arced toward the ground. The blade came within centimeters of Vader’s face plate. Sweat poured down Ferus’s face with the effort of continuing the fight. And yet still, he lived. “No older than you, Anakin,” he gasped.

And it was true. They’d once been the same age, young and stupid, easily manipulated by their Jedi Masters. Now *Vader* was Master of all—and Ferus was this weak, stooped thing. Is this what Anakin would have grown into, had he stayed in that frail, human body? This sagging bag of loose flesh?

Vader was furious with himself for entertaining the thought. It didn’t matter what Anakin would have become. Anakin was nothing—didn’t exist, had never existed.

“There is no Anakin,” Vader said,

“And yet here he is in front of me,” Ferus countered. “The same cocky, deceitful, defiant, *scared little boy* you always were. You killed Obi-Wan because he saw the fear behind the mask. You killed Padmé because she saw the monster.”

Rage blotted out Vader’s vision, turning the world to darkness—everything disappeared but Ferus’s disgusting, knowing smile. Ferus was the one who had never changed, was still the same insufferable child he’d always been. Vader should have done the galaxy a favor and snuffed him out at the Academy. Better late than never.

## STAR WARS: Uprising

Ferus advanced with a dizzying series of strikes and parries. "You can kill me, if you want. But you will never kill Anakin. I suspect someday, he'll kill you."

"Someday, perhaps." Vader flicked a gloved hand, and Ferus's lightsaber flew across the hall. "But unfortunately for you, that day is not today." He plunged his blade through Ferus's heart, and watched with pleasure as Anakin's long-lasting enemy dropped to the ground, the life draining from his eyes.

The pathetic old man knew nothing, he told himself. Anakin was dead and gone forever. And now there was no one who could bring him back.

Ferus lay still, as the thundering footsteps disappeared down the corridor. He lay on his back in a pool of blood, feeling his life force trickle away. And he lay with a smile on his face, knowing that he had succeeded.

He would have liked to kill Darth Vader.

He would have liked to save the galaxy.

But it was enough to know he had saved Leia.

He had always thought dying would hurt. But there was little pain. There was little of anything, anymore. The bonds holding him to this world were fraying.

"Be brave, my friend. You have done well." Obi-Wan knelt beside him. Not the glowing, translucent spirit Ferus had come to know, but the real Obi-Wan, solid as he had been when he was alive. The Jedi Master took Ferus's hand. "The end is never the end," he said. "Only another journey."

*More riddles*, Ferus thought wryly. Leave it to Obi-Wan to be frustratingly vague, even at a time like this. He would have laughed, but he lacked the strength. Obi-Wan smiled, as if he knew.

And then Obi-Wan faded away, and another figure appeared in his place.

Ferus gasped, choking on the blood that bubbled in his throat. His lips formed the name he hadn't spoken aloud in years.

## Alex Wheeler

Soft fingers brushed his forehead. “Did you really think I would leave you here alone?”

*You left me alone for all those years,* Ferus wanted to say. *I always hoped you were waiting for me. I always hoped I would see you again.*

Roan Lands, dead for nearly two decades, gazed down at him, his eyes full of warmth and humor. Roan, who had found Ferus after he’d fled the Jedi Temple, and taught him what it meant to truly live. Roan, who had been Ferus’s partner and friend for the best years of his life. Roan, whom he thought he’d lost forever.

Ferus’s fear was gone, replaced by a deep, calming peace. He had done what he could for the people he loved. He had fulfilled the mission Obi-Wan had set out for him, protected Anakin’s child until she was strong enough to protect herself. He had fought as best he knew how, for as long as he could. And now Roan was here, and Ferus was ready to go.

“I’ll stay with you,” Roan said, squeezing his hand. “For as long as you need me.”

Ferus let his eyes drift shut. His world narrowed to the sound of Roan’s voice, and the warmth of Roan’s hand.

“You are not alone,” he heard Roan say.

And then he heard nothing at all.

“You are not alone,” Leia whispered, squeezing Ferus’s hand even tighter, wishing she could give him her strength.

But she couldn’t.

All she could do was kneel by his body and watch as his chest rose and fell with slow, shallow breaths...and then fell still. There was a faint smile on his face, and Leia hoped it meant he had died in peace.

He was dead.

Leia had known Ferus all her life, but she felt she’d only *really* known him these last few months. She felt a hole open within her, as if she’d lost a part of her family, or even herself. He was the last connection she’d had to her past on Alderaan, and to her father. It always seemed like he had secrets he was desperate to

## STAR WARS: Uprising

share with her, if only she'd asked the right questions. But she'd never bothered to ask.

And now he was gone.

If she'd come back for him sooner, maybe she could have stopped it—whatever, whoever it was that had done this to him.

Leia knew she had to go. The sun was about to explode. And whoever had killed Ferus might still be here—might be coming back for her.

But she didn't move. She stayed by his side, holding his hand. *Just a little longer*, she told herself, *and then I'll go*.

She didn't want to leave him alone.

## Chapter Seventeen

Leia!” Luke finally spotted the princess, kneeling beside what looked like a body. He hurried over to her, Han following close behind. Luke had a bad feeling as he approached the body, but forced himself to look at the man’s face. “What happened to him?”

Leia just shook her head.

Luke hadn’t known Ferus very long or very well, but there had been something about the man that seemed so familiar, something that made him feel like part of the family. A family that was very quickly dying off.

“How about we move this party to the ship,” Han said. “Before we get toasted.”

Leia shot him a quick, wounded look, and he immediately softened his tone. “I’m sorry, Princess,” he said quietly. “But we have to go.”

“I know,” she admitted, and released Ferus’s hand. “I hate to leave him.”

Luke cleared his throat. “We won’t.”

He shared a glance with Han, and they both bent down on either side of Leia to raise the body of the fallen Jedi.

Leia took hold of Ferus’ hand once again. “Let’s go.”

They walked in silence toward the edge of the camp where the *Falcon* was docked. Chewbacca had kept the engines running. The entire fleet had jumped into hyperspace, along with the Imperials. They were the only ones left in the system, with six minutes to go. But just as they were about to take off, Luke froze.

"What is it, kid?" Han asked impatiently.

Luke raised a pair of microbinoculars to his eyes. More than a kilometer away, a figure in a black robe swept toward an Imperial shuttle.

"Vader," Luke said darkly. "You think he..."

"Yes," Leia said, without doubt. "He killed Ferus."

Luke activated his lightsaber. "And I'm not letting him get away with it."

"Luke, there's no time," Leia said.

"And there's no way you face him and live," Han added.

Luke didn't care. He was tired of running from Vader. It was time to face the enemy head on. After everything he'd been through, hadn't he proven his strength? He felt like he could do anything—and right now, destroying Vader was the only thing he wanted to do. Leia grabbed his arm.

"Luke, *think*. He'll kill you, you know that. And even if he doesn't, even if by some miracle, you manage to defeat him, it'll be too late to escape. You'll die in the shock wave." The enormous sun loomed overhead, blotting out much of the sky.

"Then either way, Vader will die," Luke said. "All I have to do is stall him, keep him from boarding that shuttle, and he's gone forever. Isn't that worth the sacrifice?"

Han snorted. "Sacrifice is overrated."

"He doesn't understand," Luke said to Leia. "But you must. After everything he's taken from you—"

"I won't let him take you, too!" Leia shouted, as close to losing control as he had ever seen her. She grabbed him by both shoulders. "How many people have given their lives so you could survive?" she asked him. "You think you can throw your life away, like it's *nothing*?"

## Alex Wheeler

Luke gritted his teeth. "It'd be worth it."

"Nothing's worth that," Han argued. "We'll have another chance. And when the time comes, we'll be there. We'll have your back."

"The galaxy needs you," Leia said. "We need you. And *you need us.*"

Luke had learned something from his imprisonment: No matter how many friends you have, no matter how determined they are to remain by your side, some things have to be faced alone. Sometimes you only had your own strength to draw from; you only had yourself to rely on.

And something told Luke that the day he finally faced Darth Vader would be one of those times.

But not yet.

Not today.

Luke watched the black-robed figure getting smaller and smaller as he swept toward his ship. *I will watch you die*, he thought. *I will make you pay for everything you've done.*

But today, instead of taking Vader's life, he would save his own. "Let's get out of here," he said, and began climbing into the *Falcon*. Leia and Han stood in the hatchway, watching him board. Suddenly, Leia's eyes widened. "Behind you!" she cried.

Luke whirled around, fumbling for a weapon. A bloodied and ragged Soresh stood at the base of the ship.

"Did you really think I would let you leave this moon alive, Luke?" Soresh shouted up at him. "You will always belong to me!" Soresh raised a blaster—just as a bolt of laserfire hit him squarely in the chest.

He toppled to the ground.

"See what I mean, kid?" Han asked. He slipped his blaster back into its holster and grinned. "That's another one you owe me."



## STAR WARS: Uprising

The shock wave blasted through the star system, steamrolling everything in its path. A small, dead moon was no match for its explosive power. The storm of fire and radiation overwhelmed the moon, blasting it to dust and ash. Within seconds, the moon was gone. Only glowing radiation and swirling debris were left behind. And still, the supernova's thirst was unquenched. The shock wave rolled on, killing one planet after another. Until what had been a star system was nothing more than a blinding glow, stretching across billions of kilometers of space.

It almost looked alive, pulsing and expanding, constantly reborn.

But looks were deceiving; it wasn't a life. It was a long and fiery death. For the sun, for the system—and for any living creature foolish enough to be caught in its wake.

"There it goes," Luke said, as the white dot on the viewscreen swelled into a luminous smear, brighter than a galaxy. Hard to believe that he was watching the death of an entire star system.

Harder still to believe that Ferus and Div were lost in the inferno, and would never be seen again.

"You think Vader made it out in time?" Leia asked. They'd left the moon with only minutes to spare and fled the system without looking back.

"He was cutting it close," Han pointed out. "Maybe Soresh did us all a favor and toasted the guy once and for all."

Luke shook his head. It was a nice dream, but he knew better. "He's still out there," Luke said. "I can feel it."

There was a tense silence. Then Han cleared his throat. "You know what we all need?"

"Sleep," Luke said. He suddenly realized how exhausted he was, emotionally and physically. This was the first time in a long time he'd had a chance to think—and he didn't like the thoughts that were crowding into his head. "I'll be in my bunk," he said, standing up. "I need to be alone for a while."

"That's the last thing you need," Han insisted. "Follow me."

## Alex Wheeler

Luke was too tired to argue. He waited as Han set the ship to autopilot, then followed him and the rest of his friends to the main hold.

"You, too, grease buckets," Han told the droids, when they hesitated. "Consider it an order."

Everyone settled around the large table in the middle of the main hold, and Han poured them all glasses of lum. Then Han raised his own glass. "To absent friends," he said. "Their sacrifices won't be forgotten."

"I thought you didn't believe in sacrifice," Leia teased him.

"I believe in getting the job done," Han said. "So did Div."

"And Ferus," Leia added, quietly.

Chewbacca roared, giving Han a hearty thump on the back.

"When you're right, you're right, buddy," Han said. He raised the glass higher. "Okay, to absent friends—and present ones." He glanced at the droids, then at Leia. "No matter how annoying they may be."

"To annoying friends," Leia repeated, holding his gaze.

As they clinked their glasses together, the room bubbled with laughter and conversation. Luke leaned back in his chair and let the sounds of friendship wash over him, thinking about how much he'd lost—and how much he still had left. He wondered how long they had before the next crisis, the next battle, the next loss. Because as long as there was an Empire, and a dark side, these moments of peace could never last. There would always be another fight. But one day, Luke promised himself, there would be one final fight—and one final victory.

Luke could only hope that when the day came, he and his friends would face it together.

## Years Later

The world was white. Snowflakes swirled in gusts of icy wind. The ground lay buried far beneath a thick layer of snow and ice. As the sun dropped beneath the horizon, the temperature dropped well below freezing. By day, the planet Hoth was only barely habitable; at night, it was a dead zone. There was no shelter from the snow, no refuge from the raking winds. It seemed impossible anything could survive such wintry torment. And yet, two creatures stumbled blindly through the frozen landscape.

One rode a tauntaun, prodding the weary animal to take one more step, and yet another, and another. The cold bit into him with sharp teeth, but he pushed on, scanning the horizon for any sign of life.

Several kilometers of snow and ice lay between him and what he sought. A lone man, crawling through the snow, losing strength by the second. Soon his limbs grew too numb to move, and he collapsed, facedown in the snow.

A third figure watched them both. A figure unbowed by the wind. A figure that was draped only in a thin, brown robe, and yet did not feel the cold.

He had been watching for a long time, watching and waiting. But now, that time had ended.

## Alex Wheeler

The time for action was upon him.

Han Solo was steering his tauntaun the wrong way. If he continued on his course, he would lose himself in the blizzard and never find his way back to Echo Base. While Luke would lie helpless in the snow, growing weaker and weaker, until he finally succumbed to the cold.

Obi-Wan reached out with the Force. Using the Force was different now, beyond the grave. He was stronger and weaker at the same time. In many ways, he *was* the Force. It animated his spirit, gave him this strange half-life—but it also separated him from the living world. He couldn't save Luke himself. But he could help Han.

Just a few degrees to the east, and a bit to the south, and Han would be on a direct course to his friend. It was little more than a gentle nudge in the right direction. Han trusted his instincts—Obi-Wan was only giving those instincts a bit of help. Whether Han would be able to keep Luke alive and get him back to the base, Obi-Wan couldn't know. But he had faith in both of them. He'd never seen such strong wills to survive.

It was time. Han would find Luke soon, and before he did, there was something Obi-Wan needed to say.

"Luke," Obi-Wan said, materializing before him.

There was no response. Had he waited too long?

"Luke," he said again, louder.

Luke raised his head. "Ben?" he asked weakly, his eyes widening.

There was so much Obi-Wan would have liked to say, but there was little time. "You will go to the Dagobah system," he said.

"Dagobah system?" Luke sounded confused. It was not surprising. Very few humans had ever heard of Dagobah—it was one of the reasons Yoda had stayed safely hidden for so long.

"There you will learn from Yoda, the Jedi Master who instructed me."

## STAR WARS: Uprising

Luke didn't understand, but he soon would. Obi-Wan had no doubt the young Jedi would follow his instructions and find his way to Dagobah—and there he would find Yoda, and his training could finally begin. Obi-Wan had watched the boy for three years, waiting to be *sure* that he was strong enough to learn the Jedi way. That he wouldn't be tempted to the dark side. That he was not another Anakin. Obi-Wan knew he shouldn't blame himself for the rise of the Empire—the rise of darkness—but he still bore the guilt.

He refused to release another such evil on the galaxy. And so he had waited, and waited, desperate to be sure.

But he had finally come to accept: You could never be sure.

You could only hope; you could only believe. He had come to know Luke well these past years, and he knew that Luke was no Anakin. He was his own man, strong enough to take on the burden and gift of being a Jedi. The training would be difficult, and there would be many temptations along the way. Luke would hear the call of the dark side...but Obi-Wan believed the boy would resist. And once Yoda had the chance to know Luke, Obi-Wan was sure he would agree.

*Trust your instincts. Trust the Force.* Words he had learned from his Masters, repeated to so many Padawan, to so many fallen friends.

He was finally ready to follow his own advice.

As Han Solo appeared on the horizon, Obi-Wan allowed himself to fade away. It was only a matter of time now. Luke would survive to fly to Dagobah. He would train. He would learn. Soon, he would be ready. The Jedi would return. And the fight for the galaxy could truly begin.



## About the Author

Alex Wheeler is the pen name of Jude Watson

JUDE WATSON is the *New York Times* best-selling author of the Jedi Quest and Jedi Apprentice series, as well as the Star Wars Journals *Darth Maul*, *Queen Amidala*, and *Princess Leia: Captive to Evil*. She currently lives in the Pacific Northwest.





# About the Type

Garamond is a group of many serif typefaces, named for sixteenth-century Parisian engraver Claude Garamond, generally spelled as Garamont in his lifetime. Garamond-style typefaces are popular and particularly often used for book printing and body text.

Garamond's types followed the model of an influential typeface cut for Venetian printer Aldus Manutius by his punchcutter Francesco Griffo in 1495, and are in what is now called the old-style of serif letter design, letters with a relatively organic structure resembling handwriting with a pen, but with a slightly more structured, upright design.